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Donal's Doric Skirmish and the Rise of the Critic Hero

Jennifer Koopman

Literary Battle

The plot of George MacDonald's 1879 novel *Sir Gibbie* hinges on a strange and understudied episode of critical aggression in Chapter Fifty, in which Donal Grant attacks his college rival Fergus Duff on matters of poetic representation. Hostilities erupt when Fergus shares the metaphor he is developing for his Sunday sermon, in which he plans to chastise the congregation on 'the emptiness of their ambitions'.¹ As he overlooks the sea, anticipating his flock's indifference to his preaching, he devises 'a certain sentence about the idle waves dashing themselves to ruin on the rocks they would destroy' (*SG*, 371). As he explains the metaphor to Donal, the ocean waves

seem to be such a picture of the vanity of human endeavour [...]. Just as little as those waves would mind me, if I told them they were wasting their labor on these rocks, will men mind me when I tell them to-morrow on the emptiness of their ambitions. (*SG*, 368)

To note: Fergus is speaking the Queen's English. Donal, by contrast, replies in indignant Doric, the dialect of MacDonald's native North East Scotland, as he rejects Fergus's reading of the waves as a redundant force:

'Hoots, Fergus!' said Donal again, in broadest speech, as if with its bray he would rebuke not the madness, but the silliness of the prophet, 'ye dinna mean to tell me yon jaws [*billows*] disna ken their business better nor imagine they hae to caw doon the rock?' (*SG*, 368)

Fergus parries Donal's objection by pointing out that he 'spoke poetically' (*SG*, 369), and reproaches Donal for his ignorance – 'I should have thought by this time you would have known a little more about the nature of poetry' (*SG*, 369)

¹ George MacDonald, *Sir Gibbie* (1879; repr. Whitethorn, California, 2000), 368; hereafter cited in the text as *SG*.

— as he reminds him that '[p]ersonification is a figure of speech in constant use by all poets' (*SG* 369). Donal swings back by dismissing Fergus's babbling 'aboot poetic license, an' that kin' o' hen-scraich' (*SG* 369), and insists on a distinction between true poetry and false poetry: '[f]or the verra essence o' poetry is trowth, an' as sune's a word's no true, it's no poetry, though it may haw on the cast claes o' it' (*SG*, 369). In other words, truth is a necessary condition for poetry: without a core of truth, no utterance can be categorised as poetry. This definition places a burden on the poet to interpret natural signs correctly: everything in nature, Donal claims, has a 'rale design' (*SG*, 370), a true purpose, the godly meaning of which must be read like symbols in a book. That MacDonald operates in an essentially textual world has been noted previously by Roderick McGillis, who observes that '[w]hat the book and nature have in common is textuality'.² The image of the world as a great book also recalls the natural supernaturalism of Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus*, which 'speak[s] of the Volume of Nature: and truly a Volume it is,—whose Author and Writer is God. [...] It is a Volume written in celestial hieroglyphs, in the true Sacred-writing; of which even Prophets are happy that they can read here a line and there a line'.³ From Donal's point of view, Fergus misreads nature's symbols in his depiction of the waves' action as useless, repetitive toil. In the teleological, God-centered universe that Donal inhabits, everything must have a purpose. Repetitive though the waves may be, theirs is not static, unproductive repetition. Nor are they warring with the rocks. Quite the opposite, it is productive, progressive work, as the waves perform their duty of keeping the world clean:

'Fergus! the jaws is fechtin' wi' nae rocks. They're jist at their pairt in a gran' cleansin' hermony. They're at their hoosemaid's wark, day an nicht, to haud the warl' clea, an' gran' an' bonnie they sing at it. Gien I was you, I wadna tell fowk any sic nonsense as yon; I wad tell them 'at ilka ane 'at disna dee his wark i' the warl', an' dee 't the richt gait, 's no the worth o' a minnin, no to say a whaul, for ilk ane o' thae wee cratur's dis the wull o' Him 'at made 'im wi' ilka whisk o' his bit tailie, fa'i in in wi' a' the jabble o' 'the jaws again' the rocks, for it's a' ae thing — an' a' to haud the muckle sea clean.' (*SG*, 370)

² Roderick McGillis, Preface to *The Story, the Teller and the Audience in George MacDonald's Fiction*, by Rebecca Thomas Ankeny, *Studies in British Literature* 44 (London, 2000), vii.

³ Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*, ed. Kerry McSweeney and Peter Sabor (1834; Oxford, 1987), 195.

Translation: waves, far from being at war with the rocks, are actually nature's housemaids, part of the world's grand cleansing harmony as they wash the world clean, and singing as they go. Fergus ought to be informing churchgoers that anyone who fails to do their godly work ranks lower than a minnow, who, along with the whale and other seas creatures, all contribute to the 'gran' cleansin' hermony' of purifying the ocean. Donal's tongue-lashing implies that writers unable to see such basic truths about the world fail in their basic function, as they 'blether' (*SG*, 370) and 'haiver' (*SG*, 369) 'nonsense' (*SG*, 370) – writers in whose company he would seat the unfortunate Fergus Duff.

As their disagreement escalates from Fergus's misguided metaphor to false poetry in general, Donal leaps to the opportunity to denounce – perhaps not entirely unexpectedly – the work of Byron. Byron, we learn earlier, is one of Fergus's favorite poets, whose work he strives to imitate in verse that 'went halting after Byron' (*SG*, 150). He is not one of Donal's preferred writers, however, as Donal proceeds to attack the passage in Canto Three of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* in which Byron personifies (wrongly, according to Donal) mountains rejoicing over the elemental birth of an earthquake:

And now again 'tis black — and now, the glee
Of the loud hills shakes with mountain mirth,
As if they did rejoice o'er a young earthquake's birth.⁴

Donal aligns Byron's prosopopoeia with the 'nonsense' (*SG*, 369) of Fergus's 'seemiles' (*SG*, 370):

'Ow ay! bu there's true and there's fause personification; an it's no ilka poetry 'at kens the differ. Ow I ken! ye'll be doon upo' me wi' Byron. [...] But even a poet canna mak less poetry. An' a man 'at in ane o' his gran'est verses cud haiver about the birth o' a young airthquack! — losh! to think o' 't growin' an auld airthquack — haith, to me it's no up till a deuk-quack! — sic a poet nicht weel, I grant ye, be he ever sic a guid poet when he tuik heed to what he siad, he nicht weel, I say, blether nonsense about the sea warrin' again' the rocks, an' sic stuff?' (*SG*, 369–70)

Fergus attempts to recover by protesting he cannot understand Donal's 'vulgar

⁴ Byron, George Gordon, Lord, 'Child Harold's Pilgrimage: A Romaunt,' *The Poems and Dramas of Lord Byron* (Chicago: Belford-Clarke, 1891), 168–234, 3.93.7–9.

Scotch' (*JG*, 369), which he disparages as 'the prosaic stupidity of poverty-stricken logomachy' (*JG*, 368). He appeals to Donal's companions Ginevra Galbraith and Mrs. Sclater for support, hoping the ladies' 'wits are not quite swept away in this flood of Doric' (*JG*, 371); however, this tactic also fails, as they claim to understand Donal '[p]erfectly' (*JG*, 371). The ocean itself, as if to punctuate Donal's triumph and Fergus's defeat (not to mention Byron's), sends forth 'a thunderous wave with a great *bonff* into the hollow at the end of the gully on whose edge they stood' (*JG*, 371), which Ginevra laughingly identifies: '[t]here's your housemaid's broom, Donal!' (*JG*, 371). The final score: Donal: one; Nature: one; Fergus: zero. Donal exits the altercation feeling sorry for Fergus. He sees poetry and priesthood as linked vocations, and Fergus fails on both counts: 'when I think of him as a preacher, I [...] see an Egyptian priest standing of the threshold of the great door [...] blowing with all his might to keep out the Libyan desert' (*JG*, 372) while 'four great stone gods, sitting behind the altar ... [are] laughing at him' (*JG*, 372). Again, Donal's understanding of the writer's role recalls Carlyle, notably his concept of the poet as hierophant: '[i]ntrinsically it is the same function which the old generations named a man Prophet, Priest, Divinity for doing'.⁵

This critical assault stands out for the way it combines two major hallmarks of MacDonald's fiction: his featuring of the Doric language, and his incorporation of earnest literary discussion as part of the plot. Scholarly neglect of this chapter is perhaps not surprising, as Fergus is not the only one to struggle with the language: for a non-Scottish reader, Doric presents a challenge. Even MacDonald's contemporaries noted difficulties with the language, with such formidable readers as Henry Crabb Robinson remarking on his inability to understand the heavily inflected speech of *David Elginbrod* (1863), the first Scottish novel.⁶ The 1900 A. L. Burt edition of *Sir Gibbie*, reproduced by photolithography in the 2000 Johannesen reprint cited here, provides translation of two words, 'jaws [*billows*]' (*JG*, 386), and 'cwite [*coal*]' (*JG*, 369), but these are drops in the proverbial bucket, as the Doric onslaught proceeds almost incessantly for four pages. Indeed, some readers may never encounter the episode at all. Michael Phillips's popular 1983 abridgement of

⁵ Thomas Carlyle, 'The Hero as a Man of Letters', *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and The Heroic in History Six Lectures Reported, with Emendation and Additions* (London, 1888), 128.

⁶ See Robinson's letter to MacDonald, in which he declares of the eponymous David Elginbrod that 'Sometimes I regret that my want of familiarity with his dialect render his not so perfectly clear to me' (Letter to George MacDonald, 3 Feb. 1863. George MacDonald Collection 103.1.3.124 Beinecke Lib., New Haven).

Sir Gibbie, published as *The Baronet's Song* by Bethany House, understandably translates Doric into standard English throughout the text; less forgivable, however, is the omission of nine-tenths of this scene, which he reduces to one sentence: 'A good deal of discussion followed, most of it to Fergus's discomfort'.⁷ It would be a shame to overlook this episode, however, as the intersection of literary critique and Doric reveals MacDonald's ideas about language, spirituality, and social class. Moreover, it stands as a turning point in the development of his main character, Donal.

Hierarchy of Language

The altercation with Fergus illustrates MacDonald's beliefs about language and spiritual authenticity, which he develops through *Sir Gibbie* (1879) and its sequel, *Donal Grant* (1884). A hierarchy of language emerges, in which linguistic primitivism (or at least perceived linguistic primitivism) correlates to spiritual exaltedness. In short, the more humble and (seemingly) simple the speech, the greater its proximity to the divine. Languages rank as follows:

1. Heaven/Wordless Divine Communion
2. Ancient Languages (e.g. Gaelic)
3. Local Patois (e.g. Doric)
4. Queen's English

Underpinning this system lies the idea that language is a symptom of the post-lapsarian condition, a result of the break from original unity with God. Heaven exists as a transverbal realm beyond language, since communion with God eradicates the need for words. MacDonald's idea of heaven as a supralinguistic realm has Augustinian origins: in 12.13 of his *Confessions*, Augustine describes heaven as 'the intellectual heaven, where the intellect is privileged to know all at once, not in part only, not as if it were looking at a confused reflection in a mirror, but as a whole, clearly, face to face'. He describes divine wisdom, moreover, as a fleeting moment of communion moving beyond all speech.⁸

⁷ Michael Phillips, *The Baronet's Song*, in *The Poet and the Pauper* (Bloomington, Minnesota, 1983), 145.

⁸ Augustine chronicles such an experience in his depiction of ephemeral translanguistic communion with his mother:

the flame of love burned stronger in us and raised us higher toward the eternal God, [...] And while we spoke of the eternal Wisdom, longing for it and straining for it with all the strength of our hearts, for one fleeting instant we reached out and touched it. Then with a sigh, leaving *our spiritual harvest* bound to it, we returned to the sound of our own speech, in which each word has a beginning and an ending

Mute Sir Gibbie embodies this state. His golden halo of hair, eyes of celestial blue, and cruciform scar on his back all mark him as a Christ figure: yet his muteness offers the primary sign of his godliness, as he moves silently through the world in ‘the holy carelessness of the eternal now’ (*SG*, 7). Supralinguistic communion appears also in MacDonald’s earlier works, notably *At the Back of the North Wind* (1871), in which Diamond struggles to convey his experiences upon returning from the immortal land ‘at the back of the north wind’: ‘when he came back, [...] what he did remember was very hard to tell. [...] The people there do not speak the same language for one thing. Indeed, Diamond insisted that they do not speak at all.’⁹ Even the river running through the land of eternity, Diamond discovers, ‘did not sing tunes in people’s ears, it sung tunes in their heads’ (*ABNW*, 124), implying how divine communication requires no words, but speaks directly to one’s intellect. The connection between wordlessness, divinity, and wind aligns Gibbie with Diamond and the North Wind. Indeed, Gibbie is one step closer to the divine: Diamond may be a privileged passenger/guest of the North Wind, but Gibbie is an outright descendant. As his surname *Galbraith* implies, he is the gale-breath of inspiration embodied in an angelic street urchin. Whereas Diamond can only hear the wordless immortal river song, Gibbie can understand and impart it. In the novel’s final chapter, Gibbie and his wife Ginevra witness the rebirth of an ancient river. The newly-reemerged burn, like the river that runs through the land at the back of the North Wind, sings a sacred song, which Gibbie understands: “‘*Gien I was a birnie, wadna I rin!*’” sang Gibbie, and Ginevra heard the words, though Gibbie could utter only the air he had found for them so long ago’ (*SG*, 447). Diamond struggled and ultimately failed to translate the river’s sacred song without words, yet Gibbie transmits it effortlessly. He is in this sense a divine *in fans*, a child-like being who lacks human speech, yet lacks nothing, because he exists in unbroken communion with God.

Ginevra, for her part, shares her husband’s freedom from language. Also born a *Galbraith* or Gale-Breath (despite her father’s petulant insistence that their line has no connection to good-for-nothing Gibbie’s family), Ginevra escapes the bonds of mortal language when she marries Gibbie. As their marriage waxes, their need for language wanes, until ‘their communication was now more

— far, far different from your Word, our Lord, who abides in himself for ever, yet never grows old and gives new life to all things. (Augustine, *Confessions*, ed. and trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin. (London, 1961) 9.10; 197–8.)

⁹ George MacDonald, *At the Back of the North Wind*, ed. Roderick McGillis and John Pennington (London, 1871; repr. Peterborough, Ontario, 2011), 122. Hereafter cited in the text as *ABNW*.

like that between two spirits: even signs had become almost unnecessary' (*SG*, 446–7). By the end of the book, she can hear Gibbie's divine, wordless song of the burn, inaudible though it would be to ordinary listeners. A comparable marriage of minds exists in the sequel *Donal Grant*, in the elderly pair Andrew and Doory Comin. A pious 'pair of originals' living 'close to the simplicities of existence',¹⁰ the Comins have blurred their boundaries of selfhood to the point that they no longer require verbal exchange: 'as they sat it seemed in the silence as if they were the same person thinking in two shapes and two places' (*DG*, 22–3). Communicating without words, the Galbraiths and the Comins offer examples of marital union in its most idealised state.¹¹ This transverbal communion stands out as one of MacDonald's more salient Romantic traits: as Roderick McGillis observes, 'MacDonald's notion of language and literature as 'things' active and immediate derives from Romanticism's eager desire for a language that can repair the separation of subject and object' (Preface, ix). M. H. Abrams further identifies such translanguistic communion as the 'experience of eternity in a moment' that is 'of common report among the philosophers and poets of the Romantic generation'.¹²

Wordless communion may be an attractive goal, yet for ordinary mortals, language remains necessary, especially for would-be poets such as Donal. That said, certain forms of language approach this state of spiritual unity better than others. Ancient tongues and dialects retain vestiges of original communion. *Donal Grant's* mystical shoemaker Andrew Comin asserts that a return to the roots of the evolutionary tree would reveal a language so pure and direct that it would cease to resemble a conventional verbal exchange. As he explains it,

gien we could work oor w'y back to the auldest grit-gran-mither-tongue o' a', I'm thinkin' it wad come a kin o' sae easy til 's, a't wi' the impruvt faculties o' oor h'avenly condition, we micht be able to in a feow days to haud communication wi' ane anither i' that same, ohn stammert or hummt an' hawt. (*DG*, 27–8)

Ironically, Andrew Comin's thick Doric makes him one of the most difficult

¹⁰ George MacDonald, *Donal Grant* (1883; repr. Whitethorn, California, 1998), 25. Hereafter cited in the text as *DG*.

¹¹ A similar transverbal union appears in the brotherly bond of Edmund and Edward Whichcote in MacDonald's *The Flight of the Shadow* (1891, Repr. Whitethorn, California, 1994).

¹² M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York, 1971), 385, 386.

characters of all to understand. Yet the point remains: ancient tongues rank higher than the Queen's English, as MacDonald idealises (perceived) linguistic primitivism as more authentic, spiritual, and true.

This celebration of primitivism aligns MacDonald with his much-admired predecessors Wordsworth and Coleridge, whose *Lyrical Ballads* renounce the artifice of Augustan poetry, and lionise what Wordsworth calls the 'plainer and more emphatic language' of rustic people.¹³ Plainer and more emphatic language, for MacDonald, includes both Gaelic and Doric. Gaelic *Sir Gibbie's* narrator portrays as an ancient, primitive, inherently noble, but rapidly disappearing tongue connected to nature: 'that language, soft as the speech of streams from rugged mountains, and wild as that of the wind in the tops of fir trees, the language at once of bards and fighting men' (*SG*, 152).¹⁴ After Gaelic, in which neither MacDonald nor Donal Grant were fluent, Scottish dialect offers the next best thing: for Donal, 'the lowland Scotch, an ancient branch of English, dry and gnarled, but still flourishing in its old age, had become instead his mother tongue' (*SG*, 152). As the narrator explains,

the man who loves the antique speech, or even the mere patois, of his childhood, and knows how to use it, possesses therein a certain kind of power over the hearts of men, which the most refined and perfect of languages cannot give, inasmuch as it had traveled further from the original sources of laughter and tears. (*SG*, 152)

The equation is clear: the more modern, refined and (seemingly) artificial a language is, the greater its distance from its authentic divine source. Thus, Donal finds 'better meat for a strong spirit' in his book of Robert Burns 'than

¹³ William Wordsworth, "Preface to the Second Edition of the *Lyrical Ballads*", *English Romantic Writers*, ed. David Perkins (Fort Worth, 1994), 424.

¹⁴ A problem remains, which MacDonald overlooks: literature featuring so-called 'simple' language of rural folk is not necessarily less artificial or more authentic than the ornate Augustan poetry eschewed by Wordsworth, MacDonald et al. Laura Mandell makes a similar point about Scottish poetry in her observation that '[f]ailing to notice that simple language is an artifice (in the positive sense of 'made') has led both nineteenth- and twentieth-century critics, paradoxically, to devalue its opposite, poetry filled with poeticisms. [...] It is simply artificial in a different way' (Laura Mandell, 'Nineteenth-Century Scottish Poetry', *The Edinburgh History of Scottish Literature: Enlightenment, Britain, and Empire (1707–1918)*, eds. Susan Manning, Ian Brown, Thomas Clancy, Murray Pittock, *Edinburgh History of Scottish Literature*, vol. 2 (Edinburgh, 2007), 303).

[in] the poetry of Byron' with its artifice, 'or even [Walter] Scott' (*SG*, 152).¹⁵

Similarly, MacDonald represents children's speech as more natural than adult speech, as it, too, contains vestiges of prelapsarian union with God. Andrew Comin's explanation that the 'auldest grit-gran'mither-tongue' (*DG*, 27) of humanity 'wad be mair like a bairn's tongue nor a mither's' (*DG*, 28), together with his suggestion that in heaven 'we might be able [...] to had communicaton wi' ane another [...] ohne stammer or hummt or hawt' (*DG*, 28), envisions a condition in which the boundaries of the self are unfixed, much like an infant that does not discern the difference between itself and its mother.¹⁶ Certainly, Gibbie's muteness and illiteracy indicate a childlike lack of self-consciousness. Young Gibbie does not exist, in his mind, as a separate entity with independent thought until the day Donal reads aloud to him from a book of ballads:

When, by slow filmy veilings, life grew clearer to Gibbie and he not only knew, but knew that he knew, his thoughts always went back to that day in the meadow with Donal Grant as the beginning of his knowledge of beautiful things in the world of man. Then first he saw nature reflected, Narcissus-like, in the mirror of her humanity, her highest self. (*SG*, 97)

MacDonald's upholding of children's speech as authentic and spiritually elevated again chimes with his Romantic predecessors, particularly Wordsworth and

¹⁵ MacDonald's belief in the purity of regional dialect may help explain his fascination with Dante, who also wrote in the vernacular and frequently works his way into MacDonald's works (such as *At the Back of the North Wind*). As Barbara Amell has shown, Dante occupied a prominent place in MacDonald's lectures ('George MacDonald on Dante: Reprinted from the Glasgow Evening News, Sept. 18, 1889', ed. Barbara Amell, *Wingsfold: Celebrating the Works of George MacDonald*, 89 (Winter 2015), 31–8. Kirstin Jeffrey Johnson further reveals how MacDonald's mentor A.J.Scott helped to shape MacDonald's appreciation for Dante's language: 'Scott repeatedly drew attention to the medium Dante utilised: the vernacular. In this Dante was a pioneer: choosing to write such an epic work in a language that could be understood by readers other than the educated elite' (Kirstin Jeffrey Johnson, 'Rooted in All its Story, More Is Meant than Meets the Ear: A Study of the Relational and Revelational Nature of George MacDonald's Mythopoeic Art' (doctoral thesis, University of St. Andrews, 2011, 104).

¹⁶ While no one has yet offered a psychoanalytic reading of Andrew Comin's comments, his idea of heaven as a return to a pre-verbal, pre-symbolic, infantile dissolution of self certainly invites this sort of interpretation, particularly given MacDonald's tendency to treat time as cyclical, with death bringing a return to the womb.

Coleridge in their *Lyrical Ballads*, as well as Blake with his *Songs of Innocence and Experience*. Sir Gibbie, with his angelic countenance and congenital muteness, incarnates the Romantic ideal of the child as an uncorrupted, pre-linguistic innocent. Even grown up, he remains, linguistically, an infant, to the extent that *infant* is derived from the Latin *infans*, or 'not speaking'. His animal-like appearance further suggests the primitive nature of his innocence, as the text variously identifies him as a horse (*SG*, 6), a bird (*SG*, 63–4), a 'beast-boy' (*SG*, 200), a brownie (*SG*, 102), a pan (*SG*, 174), and a savage in skins (*SG*, 170–4).

At the bottom of the linguistic hierarchy stand modern forms of speech, which *Sir Gibbie* depicts as pale, degraded shadows of sturdier Scottish tongues. As the narrator laments,

the old Scottish is, alas! rapidly vanishing before a poor, shabby imitation of modern English—itself a weaker language in sound, however enriched in words, since the days of Shakespeare, when it was far more like Scotch in its utterance than it is now. (*SG*, 152)

The narrator's regret that modern English should have degenerated from its earlier resemblance to Scottish hints at a basic principle that permeates MacDonald's work: proximity to Scotland is an important marker of spiritual worth. This implication fits with David Robb's observations about the nationalist preoccupations of MacDonald's novels, in which 'the pattern of conflict between right and wrong involves, as often as not, a contrast of British nationalities'.¹⁷ Robb, in his discussion of 'Victorian perception[s] of Scottish religious piety',¹⁸ argues that the frequency with which characters of obscure Scottish origins (Hugh Sutherland, Robert Falconer, David Elginbrod) rescue other characters (often English aristocrats) from depravity reinforces a 'connection between Scottish origins and improvement of life in England', a pattern so strong that 'Readers could be forgiven for thinking, "Where would the English be without the Scots?"'.¹⁹ This template extends to *Sir Gibbie*: MacDonald casts Janet and Robert Grant from the same mold as David Elginbrod, their humble origins connoting spiritual exaltedness. Living in their far-flung 'high-humble' (*SG*, 76) mountain cottage, dwelling amid '[l]

¹⁷ David Robb, 'George MacDonald and the Grave Livers of Scotland', *Rethinking George MacDonald: Contexts and Contemporaries*, eds. Christopher MacLachlan, John Patrick Pazdziora, and Ginger Stelle (Glasgow, 2013), 274.

¹⁸ Robb, 275.

¹⁹ Robb, 273.

oneliness and silence, and constant homely familiarity with the vast simplicities of nature' (*SG*, 77), the Grant family belong to 'a class now [...] extinct, but once [...] the glory and strength of Scotland' (*SG*, 76). Their choice of language further reinforces their natural piety: by insisting on praying only in Doric, at a time when 'most Scotch people of that date tried to say their prayers in English' (*SG*, 352), the Grants display a desire for spiritual authenticity that all MacDonald's good Scottish characters share. The elevation of unfashionable rural simplicity explains also why Andrew Comin discusses heaven in Doric, and why Donal deliberately uses his native tongue to defend the purity of English poetry.

The Problem of Byron

Donal's unprovoked dressing down of Byron, which seems to come out of nowhere, makes sense in light of the pattern that Robb identifies, in which 'humble Scottish heroes and heroines overcome the sins and mistakes of upper-class, even aristocratic, semi-villains, who, even if Scottish by birth, are anglicised in speech and outlook'.²⁰ The aristocratic Byron stands as a kind of anti-David Elginbrod, one who failed on every count to absorb the special spiritual opportunities of Scottish rural life. Raised in Aberdeen and attending the Aberdeen Grammar School before graduating to public celebrity in England, and thence to notorious exile abroad, Byron, with his life of scandal and misadventure, is emphatically the wrong kind of Scotsman, by MacDonald's pastoral standards of holiness. To make matters worse, Byron is, of all the English Romantic poets, the most Augustan in spirit, reveling in the kind of showiness, extravagance, and artifice that MacDonald deplored: in *England's Antiphon*, MacDonald disparages the Augustan period as a fallen age in which 'the poets of England [...] ceased almost for a time to deal with the truths of humanity'.²¹ This bias continues in *Sir Gibbie*, where the ill effects of impoverished poetry manifest themselves in the stunted intellectual and emotional development of Ginevra's governess, Miss Machar: thanks to a diet limited to lesser romantic verse – 'she had never got beyond the "Night Thoughts: and the "Course of Time"' (*SG*, 195) – the middle-aged spinster 'had withered instead of ripening' (*SG*, 195). Luckily, Ginevra pays little heed to Miss Machar's lessons, and has Donal Grant to help set her straight on matters of poetry.

²⁰ Robb, 274.

²¹ George MacDonald, *England's Antiphon* (1864; Repr. Whitethorn, California, 1996), 267–8.

MacDonald's disapproval of Byron may stem from his friendship with Byron's widow, who befriended the MacDonalds during the 1850s, and left them a £300 legacy upon her death in 1860.²² While it is impossible to say precisely what it was about the MacDonalds that appealed to Lady Byron, William Raeper suggests that MacDonald took the place of the preacher F. W. Robertson, whose friendship Annabella Byron had made in Brighton and whom she missed greatly after he died.²³ Certainly, the MacDonalds' scrupulous Christian morality would have appealed to her, and their indignation at her plight would have bolstered her carefully maintained persona of 'all-forgiving angel', as David Crane describes her.²⁴ Both MacDonald and Lady Byron were sympathetic to the possibility of universal salvation, a position that even her biographer Harriet Beecher Stowe had difficulty sharing. During their brief but intense friendship, she recounted in detail to MacDonald and Louisa the sordid history of her married life, which for years had earned her public censure. MacDonald clearly took her side: to the end, his novels vilify Byron relentlessly. In *Guild Court: A London Story* (1868), Byron provides the model for the undeserving seducer Tom Worboise, who 'flatter[s] himself with being in close sympathy with Lord Byron', a volume of whose poetry he carries in his pocket.²⁵ In *The Vicar's Daughter* (1872), Lady Bernard — a superlatively flattering homage to Lady Byron — laments the failure of her dissipated grandson, 'who was leading a strange, wild, life', and who, for all her hopes that he might 'turn out a Harry the Fifth', dies unrepentant and unredeemed.²⁶

The most scathing indictment of Byron occurs in *Alec Forbes of Honglen* (1865), in which the narrator likens Byronmania to an adolescent illness: '[t]he Byron-fever is in fact a disease belonging to youth, as the hooping-cough [sic] to childhood, — working some occult good no doubt in the end'.²⁷ Appealing to base passions rather than morality or intelligence, Byron 'makes no demand either on the intellect or the conscience, but confines himself to

²² Greville MacDonald offers a fuller discussion of the MacDonalds' involvement with Lady Byron in Chapter Five of his biography of his father, *George MacDonald and His Wife* (1924; Repr. Whitethorn, California, 1998), 300–13.

²³ William Raeper, *George MacDonald* (Tring, 1987), 132.

²⁴ David Crane, *The Kindness of Sisters: Annabella Milbanke and the Destruction of the Byrons* (London, 2003), 268.

²⁵ George MacDonald, *Guild Court: A London Story* (1868, Repr. Whitethorn, California, 1999), 6.

²⁶ George MacDonald, *The Vicar's Daughter* (1872; Repr. Whitethorn, California, 1998), 164.

²⁷ George MacDonald, *Alec Forbes of Honglen* (1865, Repr. Whitethorn, California, 1995), 207; hereafter cited in the text as *AF*.

friendly intercourse with those passions whose birth long precedes that of choice in their objects — whence a wealth of emotion is squandered’ (*AF*, 207). Certainly, Alec, Kate, and Miss Warner squander emotions aplenty while flirting over their copies of Byron. Its power is temporary, however. Like opium, the intoxicating effects of which wane with regular use, Byron’s effects do not last: ‘[m]ost of those who make the attempt are surprised — some of them troubled — at the discovery that the shrine can work miracles no more’ (*AF*, 207). Love of Byron indicates Alec, Kate, and Miss Warner’s immaturity, and implies romantic disappointment and sexual failure:

I will not weary my readers with the talk of the three young people enamoured of Byron. Of course the feelings the girls had about him differed materially from those of Alec; so that a great many of the replies and utterances met like unskillful tilters, whose staves passed wide. (*AF*, 208)

MacDonald’s depiction of unsuccessful conversation as the suggestively phallic sport of *tilting* underscores Alec’s double failure, in both literary taste and sexual pursuit. Kate rejects Alec and eventually succumbs to the charms of ‘the cunning Celt’ Patrick Beauchamp, a ne’er-do-well aristocrat who upstages Alec by reading Kate the works of Percy Shelley, ‘which quite overcrowded Byron’ (*AF*, 307). MacDonald further deflates Byron by adding that it is somehow unEnglish to like him too much. Brimming with anti-French prejudice, the narrator suggests that the public’s misplaced admiration for Byron damages their national image abroad: it is love of Byron ‘in virtue of which the French persist in regarding Byron as our greatest poet, and in supposing that we agree with him’ (*AF*, 208). That the lucky suitor Patrick Beauchamp is a Scotsman with a French name further hints at the foreign taint associated with Byron and his admirers. The failure of Alec, Kate, and Miss Warner to ‘tilt’ skillfully or successfully in their discussions of Byron implies the difficulty of being a good English knight in the face of foreign depravity. MacDonald wants a hero, yet it is not until Donal Grant that he finds one fit to defend English poetry against Byronic corruption.

(Mac)Donal(d) as Red Cross Knight

MacDonald’s condemnation of Byron accords with contemporary treatments of the poet, whose wild life troubled the decorous sensibilities of Victorian audiences and critics alike. His novels imply that Byron stands beyond

contempt, and possibly beyond salvation. His unforgiving assessment contrasts with that of his fellow critic Matthew Arnold, with whom MacDonald, on other issues, generally tended to agree. Arnold declared in his 1881 essay on Byron that the world was on the verge of awakening to the greatness of Byron's poetry, and paired him with Wordsworth as 'first and preeminent [...] among the English poets of this century'.²⁸ Like Arnold, however, MacDonald sets up Byron in opposition to the other *enfant terrible* of Romantic poetry, Percy Shelley, with Byron playing the fallen demon to Shelley's beautiful angel. In *Sir Gibbie* this opposition plays out in the rivalry between Fergus and Donal. Whereas Fergus seeks to imitate Byron in his poetry, Donal produces verse 'with a slight flavor of [Percy] Shelley' (*SG*, 410), a writer with whom MacDonald was more sympathetic,²⁹ and keener to identify.³⁰ As *Sir Gibbie* chronicles Donal's rise from obscurity to heroism, we find a protagonist with a decided resemblance to MacDonald. Through much of the novel he suffers social embarrassment as a country boy transplanted to the university town. Rural clothing sets him apart: even through the sympathetic eyes of Ginevra, 'he looked undeniably odd' (*SG*, 336) in his coarse-woven shirt, 'buff-colored fustian' trousers, 'olive-green waistcoat', 'blue tail-coat with lappet', 'well-polished' hob-nailed boots and 'beaver hat' (*SG*, 333). Country living suited him better, she reflects: 'he was a more harmonious object [...] when dressed in his corduroys and blue bonnet, walking the green fields, with cattle about him' (*SG*, 336) than consorting with polite urban society, which judges his appearance to be 'very queer' (*SG*, 336) indeed. His awkwardness may originate in MacDonald's own youthful experiences: as Colin Manlove observes, '[i]t seems clear enough from the biographical facts we have that MacDonald suffered from his own uncouthness in society'.³¹ Like Donal, MacDonald in his college years was plagued with poverty, and he frequently required financial assistance. As he

²⁸ Matthew Arnold, 'Byron', 1881, *Essays in Criticism* (New York, n.d.), 384.

²⁹ See especially MacDonald's 1860 essay 'Shelley', written for the 8th edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (Vol. 20, 1860), 100–4.

³⁰ Elsewhere I discuss Donal's development as a specifically Shelleyan protagonist; see 'Gothic Degeneration and Romantic Rebirth in *Donal Grant*', *Rethinking George MacDonald: Contexts and Contemporaries*, eds. Christopher MacLachlan, John Patrick Pazdziora, and Ginger Stelle (Glasgow, 2013), 198–215. For further discussion of MacDonald's Shelleyan protagonists, see also "'The Cruel Painter" as a Re-Writing of the Shelley-Godwin Triangle', *North Wind: A Journal of George MacDonald Studies* 26 (2007), 48–76.

³¹ Colin Manlove, 'George MacDonald's Early Scottish Novels', *Nineteenth-Century Scottish Fiction: Critical Essays*, ed. Ian Campbell (New York, 1979), 82.

wrote to his father in 1847, 'I do not expect to save anything in my present situation. You have no idea what it is to live in London. I have paid £7 for boots & shoes since I came, and not a pair but you would say is worn to the last'.³²

Linguistic differences exacerbate Donal's discomfiture, as Doric becomes a social liability in the university town where none of Ginevra's young lady friends can 'understand such broad Scotch' (*JG*, 340). The girls dismiss Donal as 'a clodhopper' and 'a treasure of poverty-stricken amusement' (*JG*, 336), tittering uncontrollably whenever he opens his mouth, and openly preferring his mute friend Gibbie, 'because he could not speak, which was much less objectionable than speaking like Donal! — and funny, too, though not so funny as Donal's clothes' (*JG*, 340). By contrast, Fergus Duff scorns his rural origins and native dialect in the interests of social advancement. Fergus's protest that he, a 'magistrand [...] about to take his degree of Master of Arts' cannot understand Donal's 'vulgar Scotch' is disingenuous, a cover for the fact that he feels threatened by the 'upstart' herd-boy, now that Donal has made it to university and is no longer the 'cleaner-out of his father's byres' (*JG*, 369). Donal's inability to make any headway with Ginevra and her friends works its way into a nightmare rife with Spenserian overtones: he dreams he is an enchanted serpent, a 'laithly worm' (*JG*, 338) gripping a book in his coils, who wants desperately to speak to a lady clad in Juniper (which translates as the French word *gînevre*, from which Ginevra is derived). Unfortunately, he can emit nothing but an inarticulate hiss (*JG*, 339).

The clash with Fergus marks his transformation, when the serpent scales fall away and he stands revealed in his true identity as chivalric defender of literature. His appearance changes too: 'town-made clothes' replace shepherd garb, and he greets Ginevra 'with an air of homely grace' like that of 'the Red Cross Knight [putting] on the armour of a Christian man [...] From a clownish fellow he straightway appeared the goodliest knight in the company' (*JG*, 366). Release from inarticulate enchantment to heroic eloquence brings with it a new ability to communicate: following the showdown with Fergus, he goes on to have 'a good deal of talk about the true and false in poetry' (*JG*, 372) with Ginevra, (though she still rejects him and marries Gibbie in the end). Fergus, meanwhile, emerges worse for wear, revealed by Donal to be 'a poor

³² George MacDonald to George MacDonald Sr., 12 Jan 1847 (George MacDonald Collection 103.1.3.147. Beinecke Library, New Haven); see also Raeper, *George MacDonald* 43, 44; Greville MacDonald, *George MacDonald and his Wife*, 68.

shallow creature' (SG, 381) given to showiness and pretention.

The image of Donal as the Red Cross Knight, defender of truth in literature, has further biographical resonances. MacDonald's friends seem to have considered him as a kind of literary Saint George: a drawing by his friend and illustrator Arthur Hughes portrays MacDonald (along with his daughter Mary, dressed as Carroll's Alice) at his writing desk, in the position of Saint George, lounging atop the prostrate body of the defeated dragon (see Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Undated drawing by Arthur Hughes, portraying George MacDonald as Saint George, and his daughter Mary MacDonald as Lewis Carroll's Alice. (From William Raeper, *George MacDonald* (Irving, 1987)).

Years later, his son Greville would call his visionary romance *Lilith* 'the Revelation of St. George', a byname that pleased MacDonald and his wife both.³³ Donal's encounter with Fergus emphasises the heroic significance that MacDonald attached to literary endeavours, illustrating his 'equation,' as William Raeper describes it, that 'true knights are also true poets'.³⁴

That he saves the heroic glitter for a critical debate about literary representation suggests a new kind of heroism, however. MacDonald

³³ *George MacDonald and his Wife*, 548.

³⁴ Raeper, 211.

straddles the ages, one foot planted in the camp of his radical visionary Romantic predecessors, and the other on the side of his contemporaries, the eminent (and eminently long-bearded) Victorians. *Sir Gibbie* reveals this duality and mythologises a historic shift at work. The Romantic celebration of poet-hero (such as we find, for example, with Anodos in MacDonald's *Phantastes*) is giving way to a new champion, the Victorian critic-hero, an unaffected, reform-minded man capable of discerning literary wheat from chaff with intellectual rigor and sober judgement. *Sir Gibbie* provides an opportunity for self-mythologising, too, as Donal's display of critical prowess fits with MacDonald's real-life role as lecturer and critic. Overall, we might position the episode as a response to Matthew Arnold's call for literary criticism in 'The Function of Criticism in the Present Time' (1865), in which he disparages the earlier Romantic movement as a 'premature' 'burst of creative activity' that needed an intellectual, critical foundation to uphold it. MacDonald knew Arnold's work and shared Arnold's view of poetry as a high and sacred pursuit. Whether Donal's outburst constitutes a deliberate response to Arnold's call for criticism, or whether MacDonald's ideas were simply running along a parallel course, remains a question. Certainly, however, the parallels are suggestive. Donal's censure of Fergus (not to mention Byron) implies that literature wants a new hero, not a larger-than-life Romantic poet-adventurer, but a humble and unpretentious Victorian critic-hero to defend its sacred integrity. In *Sir Gibbie*, that hero is Donal Grant. In real life, it is MacDonald himself. *Sir Gibbie* reveals this duality and mythologises a historic shift at work. The Romantic celebration of poet-hero (such as we find, for example, with Anodos in MacDonald's *Phantastes*) is giving way to a new champion, the Victorian critic-hero, an unaffected, reform-minded man capable of discerning literary wheat from chaff with intellectual rigor and sober judgement. *Sir Gibbie* provides an opportunity for self-mythologising, too, as Donal's display of critical prowess fits with MacDonald's real-life role as lecturer and critic. Overall, we might position the episode as a response to Matthew Arnold's call for literary criticism in 'The Function of Criticism in the Present Time' (1865), in which he disparages the earlier Romantic movement as a 'premature' 'burst of creative activity' that needed an intellectual, critical foundation to uphold it. MacDonald knew Arnold's work and shared Arnold's view of poetry as a high and sacred pursuit. Whether Donal's outburst constitutes a deliberate response to Arnold's call for criticism, or whether MacDonald's ideas were simply running along a parallel course, remains a question. Certainly, however, the

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