

**Saving the Monsters?
Images of Redemption in the Gothic
Tales of George MacDonald**

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George MacDonald is known to most readers for his children's stories; to a smaller number for his Christian mythopoeia, *Phantastes* and *Lilith*; to a smaller number still for his novels, sermons, and poetry. But few are aware of his several contributions to Victorian gothic fiction and, while studies have been undertaken that deal with gothic and chthonic aspects of *Phantastes* and *Lilith*, no treatment of MacDonald as a gothic writer in his own right has yet emerged.¹

In part this is probably because critics and scholars have had difficulty defining the boundaries of the genre.² While it ultimately derives its name from the fact that many of the earliest and best known examples, beginning with Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), are set among Gothic edifices in remote regions of Europe, by the early-nineteenth century the genre came to be characterized less by geography and architecture and more by its stock figures such as vampires, ghosts, and other revenants who supernaturally and eerily transcend the barrier between the living and the dead. Apart from these rather obvious characteristics, however, the question of the genre's moral economies also looms large. J. Sheridan Le Fanu, "the supreme master of the Victorian tale of terror" (Cavaliero 37), and a contemporary of George MacDonald, perhaps captures its essence most succinctly when he writes in "The Watcher" (1847):

. . . there does exist beyond this a spiritual world—a system whose workings are generally in mercy hidden from us—a system which may be, and which is sometimes, partially and terribly revealed. I am sure—I *know* . . . that there is a God—a dreadful God—and that retribution follows guilt. In ways, the most mysterious and stupendous; by agencies, the most inexplicable and terrific . . . (31)³

It is important to note that the moral framework that Le Fanu describes—in which retribution inevitably follows guilt—is not unique to gothic fiction. Indeed, it is fairly easy to discern similar patterns of varying complexity in the work of many eighteenth and early-nineteenth century novelists including Scott, Thackeray, and Goldsmith. Even Defoe and Fielding, in spite of the accusations of moral subversion made by some of their contemporaries, do not support outcomes much at variance with the primarily punitive legal codes of their day.⁴ What sets the gothic tale apart from stories belonging to other genres, then, is not simply the moral economy it employs, but the overtly supernatural agency by which that economy is realized. And while ghosts, werewolves, vampires, and other revenants often function as the supernatural agents who, wittingly or unwittingly, bring about the malefactor's punishment, the true terror of the tale arises from the fact that the ultimate source of the punishment is both inexorable and divine in origin.⁵

Although MacDonald's gothic stories are imbued with an undeniably gothic atmosphere, his religious convictions prompted him to depart from the genre's conventions in one crucial way: MacDonald's stories allow not only for the escape of the protagonist but also leave room for the repentance and ultimate salvation of the antagonist.⁶ And although it has been observed that the mid-Victorian novel often allows for a more sympathetic treatment of malefactors than earlier narratives in general, where "crime was inseparable from the environment in which, or by which, it was produced" (Pettit 282), the Victorian gothic tale does not follow a similar trajectory. Nor can MacDonald's gothic stories be viewed simply as inheritors or contributors to this wider trend in Victorian literature. In the works often identified as particularly characteristic of this tendency towards lenience, including Dickens's *Hard Times* and Eliot's *Adam Bede*, malefactors are placed in circumstances so complex and trying that their crimes become all but unavoidable and therefore, to some extent, excusable. Almost without exception, MacDonald makes no attempt to stir a similar kind of sympathy in his reader; instead, the antagonists' crimes in his gothic tales are depicted as flowing from independent and deliberate choices that, apart from God's grace, are utterly inexcusable. As MacDonald writes elsewhere: "All sin is unpardonable. There is no compromise to be made with it. We shall not come out except clean, except having paid the uttermost farthing" (*Unspoken Sermons* 59; cf. Matt. 5:26). Unlike those Victorian writers who adopt a more indulgent stance when describing individual culpability and

the social causality of crime, then, MacDonald is clear that sin, though perhaps more or less tempting in various circumstances, remains sin and only divine grace expunges guilt.

As this article will attempt to argue, MacDonald's gothic tales have been excluded, rightly or wrongly, from the gothic canon not because they were regarded as belonging to another genre, nor because they lack the power to induce real terror using many gothic stock figures, but rather because MacDonald's theological convictions prompted him to write stories that violate what has come to be perceived as the fundamental and persistent moral economy of the genre when they fail to end in unambiguous "hopeless desolation"—even and especially for antagonists whose actions are freely and willfully destructive.

This is perhaps somewhat surprising since, *prima facie*, it isn't the moral economy of the genre so much as the supernatural revenants and eerie furniture that seem most out of place when juxtaposed to the wider Christian tradition. Indeed, notions of divine retribution and punishment that underlie the gothic genre as a whole are not much at variance with the Scottish Calvinism in which George MacDonald was born and bred. As MacDonald's religious views matured throughout his early adult life, however, he increasingly rejected Calvinism and its central doctrine of predestined salvation for the elect and eternal punishment for the damned. While MacDonald was attending King's College as a young man, Ralph Wardlaw's doctrine of universal redemption began to take hold throughout Scotland, especially among the young, from 1840 to 1844. Those seminary students and congregations who were sympathetic found themselves expelled and disendowed. MacDonald's son Greville writes that, "Among these black sheep most certainly was George MacDonald" (*George MacDonald and His Wife* 79; see also Raeper 240ff.). Under the influence of preachers like Wardlaw, Frederick Denison Maurice,⁷ and others, MacDonald came to believe that just as surely as evil taints everyone, so would God's inexhaustible love finally overwhelm evil and sin and restore everyone and everything to wholeness in Christ. MacDonald's attraction to this doctrine flowed in part from his profound desire for personal salvation along with a simultaneously deep awareness of his own sinfulness: "the kind of love I needed was the love that all men needed, the love that belonged to their nature as the children of the Father, a love that he could not give to me except he gave it to all men" (*George MacDonald and His Wife* 85).⁸ MacDonald's extraordinary assertion that a Christian "fails of his perfection

so long as there is one being in the universe he could not love” (“Individual Development” 75) flows from this principle. It is easy to see how beliefs such as these made his childhood Calvinistic faith untenable and resulted in his extension of the boundaries that circumscribe the elect to include everyone and everything in God’s creation.⁹ Even demons are understood as instruments of God’s greater good: “All pains, indeed, and all sorrows, all demons, yea, and all sins themselves, under the suffering care of the highest minister, are but the ministers of truth and righteousness” (*Mary Marston* 2 321; qtd. in Raeper 253).

Through the lens of MacDonald’s theology, then, the entire world becomes safe and wholly good: “The earth as God sees it . . . is good, all good, very good, fit for the meek to inherit” (*Hope of the Gospel* 88); and for those who understand God’s goodness “[t]he world has . . . no chamber of terror” (*Hope of the Gospel* 53). Nor is the opportunity for redemption ever fully past. Hell itself is strictly a temporary place of purgation.¹⁰ In quoting from Shakespeare’s “Rape of Lucrece,” MacDonald draws special attention to a single line of the text: “*To wrong the wronger till he render right.* Here is a historical cycle worthy of the imagination of Shakespeare, yea worthy of the creative imagination of our God” (“The Imagination” 17; emphasis MacDonald’s). Punishment, though essential to MacDonald’s economy of salvation, is never punitive. Wronging the wronger is necessary only until he renders right—only until his redemption is complete. MacDonald argues similarly that the elder Hamlet’s ghostly sufferings are purgative only and therefore temporary: “. . . the hell in which he finds himself shall endure but until it has burnt up the hell he has found within him—until the evil he was and is capable of shall have dropped from him into the lake of Fire” (“Elder Hamlet” 175). It is important to note that one must be careful when reading MacDonald’s theology not to conflate hell and the biblical lake of fire (Apoc. 20:13-15). MacDonald’s hell is much like Roman Catholicism’s purgatory while the lake of fire is an abyss in which our sins—not ourselves—are forever annihilated: “. . . at length, O God, wilt thou not cast Death and Hell into the lake of fire—even into thine own consuming self? Death shall then die everlastingly . . .” (*Unspoken Sermons* 32; see also Raeper 253-255, Sturch 57-58).

MacDonald’s religious beliefs are particularly relevant when considering his contributions to Victorian gothic fiction because he worked in the conscious belief that his faith should and must inform his understanding of the “laws of the universe,” his imagination, and therefore his craft as a writer. He writes that the proper role of the imagination is “to understand

God ere she attempts to utter man” and further on, “we dare to claim for the true, childlike, humble imagination, such an inward oneness with the laws of the universe that it possesses in itself an insight into the very nature of things” (“The Imagination” 13). MacDonald held that his and every imagination found its origin not in the self but in God who redeemed it and lent it potency: “If the dark portion of our own being were the origin of our imaginations, we might well fear the apparition of such monsters as would be generated in the sickness of a decay which could never feel—only declare—a slow return towards primeval chaos. But the Maker is our Light” (“The Imagination” 25). All of this, of course, takes us very far from both Le Fanu’s strictly retributive cosmology and “dreadful God,” as well as the mid-Victorian novelist’s belief in the social causality of crime. Whether what MacDonald leaves us with are in fact gothic tales in the true sense or merely stories possessing a gothic atmosphere is a question that depends for its answer upon the extent to which one insists variously on the presence of either the furniture or the moral economies typical of the genre.

MacDonald’s obvious fascination with the furniture, if not the moral economies, of the genre flowed from a lifelong obsession with death both as a theological abstraction and as a personal inevitability. Indeed, he recalls that his “own earliest definable memory [was] of a great funeral” (“Individual Development” 43); as a young seminarian at Highbury College, much to the discomfort of his professor, he raised the topic of ghosts for serious theological discussion (*George MacDonald and his Wife* 115); and years later he commented that, apart from Hamlet himself, the elder Hamlet’s ghost was by far the most interesting character in Shakespeare’s famous play (“Elder Hamlet” 170). And unlike the retributive moral economy typical of the gothic tale that was theologically repugnant to him, MacDonald was able to freely incorporate ghosts, werewolves, and vampires into his tales precisely because he did not believe they were “essential to salvation” (“Uncle Cornelius His Story” 311). Instead of inducing terror for the purposes of retribution, MacDonald uses these stock figures to evoke a genuinely gothic and foreboding atmosphere for the specific purpose of bringing about the repentance and ultimate redemption of his truly culpable antagonists. In order to illustrate this and other ways in which MacDonald’s theological convictions so altered his contributions to the genre that most critics have been unable even to identify them as properly gothic, this paper will consider four examples—three short stories and one poem: “The Cruel Painter” (1864), “The Haunted House” (1883), “The Gray Wolf” (1871), and “Uncle Cornelius His Story” (1869).

Appearing nearly midway between John Polidori's *The Vampyre* (1819) and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), MacDonald's vampire story "The Cruel Painter" was first published in the 1864 edition of *Adela Cathcart* but was curiously not included in the second edition of 1882. And although it contains some of MacDonald's most singular characterizations, it has failed to attract any substantial critical attention.¹¹ In it, MacDonald follows some of the gothic genre's earliest conventions by setting his story on the European continent and eventually explaining away its supernatural elements. MacDonald also consciously and overtly draws on vampire folklore to a degree uncommon even among the genre's most canonical authors. Specifically, he recounts events set forth in the sixteenth-century tale "The Shoemaker of Breslau" to furnish an atmosphere of gloom and threat—these include a shoemaker's suicide, subsequent vampire appearances, exhumation of the body under official supervision, continuance of the disturbances even after the exhumation and placing under gallows, and the final destruction of the vampire through burning.¹² In place of Breslau, however, MacDonald substitutes Prague and assigns the events to "a few years before the period" (182) of the present story. But he departs more surely here than in any of his later tales from the moral economies of the genre; in this tale the villain's punishment, though central to the story's development, is not punitive. Instead it serves only as a necessary prelude to repentance and final redemption. Because of the dearth of critical comment, along with the fact that the story itself is lengthy at more than 13,000 words, it will be helpful to consider it in some detail.

Like the earliest examples of the genre, MacDonald uses the house in which the story's antagonist lives, and from whom it takes its name, as an architectural metaphor for moral destitution. It has a "dreary, desolate aspect . . . like a place on which decay had fallen because there was no indwelling spirit. The mud of years was baked upon its door, and no faces looked out of its dusty windows" (169). The painter and owner of the house, "Teufelsbürst" or "Devilsbrush" (170), is among MacDonald's most distressing portrayals of human corruption and depravity. Only the most acute suffering of others is able to stir in him the impulse to paint:

In the moments that precede sleep, when the black space before the eyes of the poet teems with lovely faces, or dawns into a spirit-landscape, face after face of suffering, in all varieties of expression, would crowd, as if compelled by the accompanying fiends, to present

themselves, in awful levée, before the inner eye of the expectant master. Then he would rise, light his lamp, and, with rapid hand, make notes of his visions . . . every individual face which had rejoiced his evil fancy. Then he would return to his couch, and, well satisfied, fall asleep to dream yet further embodiments of human ill. (170)

It should not go unnoticed that MacDonald's images are consistent with Augustine's doctrine of evil as privation—that evil is a corruption only and has no life or existence on its own. Teufelsbürst's paintings, for example, cannot illustrate evil other than to show, "face and form which . . . where all beautiful in the original idea" (170). Even the ugliness of the demons isn't intrinsic but "rise[s] from hate, envy, and all evil passions" (171). And while Teufelsbürst is careful to base his work on historical tragedy to avoid censorship, "No one . . . who looked upon his suffering martyrs, could suppose for a moment that he honoured their martyrdom. They were but the vehicles for his hate of humanity. He was the torturer, and not Diocletian or Nero" (171-172). Wholly unrepentant, Teufelsbürst is acutely aware of, and revels in, his own wickedness: into his paintings he often insinuates himself as one among the "clouds of demon faces . . . such as the mirror might have presented . . . him when he was busiest over the incarnation of some exquisite torture" (171). But his face is not the only one to appear. Amid scenes of such appalling suffering the painter also depicts his daughter Lilith. Teufelsbürst, however, is always careful to render her human and to preserve her physical beauty:

. . . there was no picture, whatever its subject, into which he did not introduce one form of placid and harmonious loveliness . . . Not a shade crossed the still sky of that brow, not a ripple disturbed the still sea of that cheek. She did not hate, she did not love the sufferers: the painter would not have her hate, for that would be to the injury of her loveliness: would not have her love, for he hated . . . (172)

It is with this image, divorced from the embroidery of suffering that frames it in each picture, that the story's protagonist falls in love. In the hope of winning the heart of the painter's daughter, "the most celebrated beauty in Prague" (168), that young protagonist, Karl von Wolkenlicht, joins Teufelsbürst's household as an apprentice. Lilith, however, is described as "a beauty without a heart" (173) and is utterly unmoved by his attentions.

Teufelsbürst meanwhile observes with great aesthetic pleasure the pain that Lilith's indifference causes Karl. And so begins "a system of slow torture" (175) where Teufelsbürst uses his daughter as an instrument to "hold the very heart of the youth in his hand, and wring it and torture it to his own content" (176).

In tales typical of the genre Karl would probably succumb to the machinations of his tormentor and, at least in the earliest examples, the tormentor would himself remain recalcitrant and suffer some form of retributive and enduring punishment. In a sharp but not wholly unconventional turn, Karl is instead saved from an evil fate by the slow transformation of his own determined and unrequited love for Lilith. Although her aloofness wounds him at first, he finally refuses to despair and, like MacDonald's God, resolves for her sake to "bear anything—bear even with calmness the torments of his own love; he would stay on, hoping and hoping" (180). In this way, MacDonald frees his protagonist spiritually before and without the necessity of physically freeing him from Teufelsbürst's gloomy house: "with the birth of his resolution to endure, his suffering abated; his face grew more calm; his love, no less earnest, was less imperious; and he did not look up so often from his work when Lilith was present" (180). Karl's love for Lilith mirrors Christ's own to the extent that it is no longer concerned with bringing about his own gratification but instead permits in the beloved a completely unfettered will. When Lilith herself falls in love with Karl later in the narrative she also, interestingly, is liberated from her fears and anxieties.¹³ Importantly, Lilith's belated love also proves essential to bringing about a complete reconciliation among all three characters by the story's conclusion.

Before such an outcome can even be imagined, however, Karl's love and spiritual progress lead to the central crisis of the story. Teufelsbürst, of course, is not pleased with a pupil who is "more at ease . . . and making rapid progress in his art" (180) and so prepares a "decoction of certain herbs" (180) to increase the intensity of his apprentice's longings for Lilith. Frustrated by the drug's external ineffectiveness, however, Teufelsbürst finally resorts to telling tales about vampires to frighten the young man. But what begins as a fabrication to terrify Karl soon redounds on the teller: anxiety about vampires independently spreads throughout the citizenry, and Teufelsbürst finds himself unable to resist "the infection of fear that was literally raging in the city" (184). MacDonald draws on traditional vampire folklore to color the rumors of evil multiplying throughout Prague, writing

that “[The vampire] strangled old men; insulted women; squeezed children to death; knocked out the brains of dogs against the ground . . .” (185). At this point MacDonald begins the process of wronging the wronger: and Teufelsbürst seems, for the first time, suddenly vulnerable to Le Fanu’s inexorable “dreadful God” and the punishing supernatural powers at that God’s command. Yet MacDonald is careful to show that Teufelsbürst’s suffering is never an end in itself. Instead, terrifying circumstances serve consistently to drive the story’s antagonist ever closer to repentance. And while Teufelsbürst’s continued machinations soon grow beyond his control, they finally serve, like MacDonald’s demons, only as “ministers of truth and righteousness”: for “Where it is possible that fear should exist, it is well that it should exist, cause continual uneasiness, and be cast out by nothing less than love” (*Unspoken Sermons* 315).

Teufelsbürst’s increasing anxiety and frustration cause him to administer a sudden or cumulative overdose that has the effect of inducing in Karl a “cataleptic” (192) state. Finding his young apprentice “rigid and apparently lifeless” (187) Teufelsbürst’s efforts to revive him are as genuine as they are futile. Believing him to be dead, the painter throws a velvet pall over his victim to prevent Lilith from discovering the corpse. But this apparently tragic turn of events has the incredible effect of stirring in Lilith’s heart both a love for Karl and contrition for her own indifference:

She could have loved him if he had only lived: she did love him, for he was dead. But even in the midst of the remorse that followed—for had she not killed him?—life seemed a less hard and hopeless thing than before. For it is love itself and not its responses or results that is the soul of life and its pleasures. (189)

The final sentence is most instructive. Like Karl before her, because Lilith does not expect her love to be returned, it begins to resemble a higher and more divine love: one wholly disinterested and enduringly patient. And although she was perhaps never entirely her father’s willing instrument, she now knows that because of her love for Karl she is from Teufelsbürst “in some new way . . . divided by the new feeling in which he did not, and could not share” (189).

In a singular departure from the conventions of the genre, MacDonald begins to use terror in earnest as an instrument to bring about the final repentance of his profoundly misanthropic antagonist. That terror,

moreover, will endure as long, but no longer, than it must for “such is the mercy of God that he will hold his children in the consuming fire . . . until they pay the uttermost farthing, until they drop the purse of selfishness with all the dross that is in it” (*Unspoken Sermons* 535; cf. Matt. 5:26).

After Karl revives and before he flees the house, he encounters the painter in the darkened hall outside the studio. What Teufelsbürst had imagined only as a vague though frightening possibility faces him as undeniably real in the image of Karl, whom he takes to be a vampire, advancing towards him with the velvet pall thrown about his back. Teufelsbürst is “seized with invincible terror,” flees to his room and there falls “senseless on the floor” (193). The “hell in which he finds himself” burns with crippling intensity—but it “shall endure but until it has burnt up the hell he has found within him—until the evil he was and is capable of shall have dropped from him into the lake of fire” (“Elder Hamlet” 175). Teufelsbürst is never beyond hope. He is, in fact, closer to repentance and redemption now than at any other point in the story:

Crying . . . for God’s forgiveness, these men had almost separated their humanity from themselves, had taken their part with the powers of darkness. Forgiveness while they were such was an impossibility. No. Out of that they must come, else there was no word of God for them. But the very word that told them of the unpardonable state in which they were, was just the one form the voice of mercy could take in calling on them to repent. They must hear and be afraid. (*Unspoken Sermons* 61)

While conforming his narrative ever more closely to his theology, MacDonald continues to invoke a gothic atmosphere. Although Karl knows that he is no vampire, he is also aware of Teufelsbürst’s growing fear. Nor is Karl quite free of his desire for revenge. At a key juncture in the narrative he resolves to “keep up the delusion” (193). Against the backdrop of MacDonald’s theology it is clear that Karl is not yet perfect because he can neither forgive nor love his tormenter. In this way, MacDonald effectively dissolves the distinction between antagonist and protagonist by exchanging the roles of victim and aggressor and thereby showing that repentance and redemption are universally needed if not always universally sought. In the end it is only the mutual love that Karl and Lilith share that finally allows the young apprentice to forgive the painter his transgressions. At this point in

the story, however, that outcome is far from assured. In fact, it only remains a possibility because Lilith, though she has little reason to believe that Karl is not a vampire, amazingly persists in loving him.

Lilith knows from her folklore that a vampire is only “a body retaining a kind of animal life after the soul ha[s] departed” (185). But she wonders nevertheless if the revenant haunting her father might somehow still embody some small part of the Karl she loves. The singularity of her enduring love for a creature that she knows must be ruined by an almost incalculable corruption is perhaps lost on the modern reader acquainted with the romances between vampires and women common in such popularizations as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) and Francis Ford Coppola’s 1992 film adaptation of Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*. To appreciate the contrast with other gothic writers, one need only compare Lilith’s persistent love for Karl to Polidori’s misogynistic vampyre or Stoker’s nineteenth-century novel where *Dracula* (unlike in Coppola’s film adaptation) is strictly a predator who neither loves women nor inspires love in them. Indeed, like MacDonald’s portrait of Teufelsbürst, *Dracula*’s interest in others extends only as far as he can use them as instruments to cause wider suffering. Against this backdrop—one in which Karl is not the romanticized criminal one might encounter in the Newgate novels or the works of other contemporary Victorian novelists but a depraved supernatural monster—Lilith’s ongoing love for him is truly astonishing.

. Karl’s torments, meanwhile, have the powerfully redemptive effect of causing the painter “to experience a kind of shrinking from the horrid faces in his own pictures, and to feel disgusted at the abortions of his own mind” (202). Lilith is simultaneously emboldened by her “new sense of love [which] all the atmosphere of grief into which it grew could not totally quench” (202) and resolves to confront Karl during one of his nocturnal visits. After some initial trepidation, they are reconciled by “That love only which fills the heart [and] is able to cast out fear, leaving no room for its presence” (*Unspoken Sermons* 314). In full and mutual possession of the knowledge that Karl is no vampire, they face the question of how they can remain together without stirring Teufelsbürst’s unquenchable rage at the events of the past several days. Because Lilith refuses to “hear of forsaking him who had banished all the human race but herself” (209), Karl is left with no other alternative but to forgive his aggressor. In this, MacDonald departs completely from the moral economies employed by other gothic writers by setting before his protagonist the task, not of escaping his

tormentor, but of forgiving him. Because it is so difficult a task, however, it must be admitted that this crucial moment in the narrative has the potential to strike readers as somewhat forced. It should be remembered, however, that for MacDonald all love is impossible unless aided by God—indeed, “the purest effort of will of which we are capable cannot lift us up even to the abstaining from wrong to our neighbour” (*Unspoken Sermons* 130). The rapidity and seeming ease with which this turn of events is realized requires that the reader accept it, like any miracle, on faith.

When Teufelsbürst arrives at his studio the next morning, doubtless expecting further torments, he finds the effect of this miracle: Karl seated at his easel. The young man explains that, though he had been unwell and had stayed these several days with a friend, he now plans to make up for lost time. “Teufelsbürst stood staring at him for some minutes without moving, then sat down with a long-drawn sigh as if of relief” (211). Importantly, his relief is not that of a man who believes he has sinned with impunity. The genuineness of Teufelsbürst’s repentance becomes obvious in his changed ways. Soon “it became evident that the peculiar direction of his art in which he had hitherto indulged had ceased to interest him” (211-2). Instead, he undertakes to paint a portrait of Karl “without evil or suffering” (212). The final proof of Teufelsbürst’s awareness that he has been forgiven comes in the last few words of the story and amid one of MacDonald’s most charming images of human redemption:

But [Karl] did not dare to tell him the truth of the vampire story till one day that Teufelsbürst was lying on the floor . . . half smothered in grandchildren; when the only answer it drew from the old man was a kind of shuddering laugh and the words “Don’t speak of it, Karl, my boy!” (212)

Two ingredients essential to this outcome are Teufelsbürst’s own repentance and, more difficult to imagine, Karl’s forgiveness of his former tormentor. Had Karl withheld his forgiveness, he certainly would have denied Teufelsbürst the joy of being “smothered in grandchildren.” But he would also have denied Lilith a husband and himself a wife and children. He would have, therefore, succeeded in denying himself as least as much happiness as he denied his tormentor. Forgiveness, in this way, serves as the only effective apotropaic against human wrongdoing. The love that grows up between victim and aggressor, moreover, must be perfect and freely

given for “So long as love is imperfect, there is room for torment” (*Unspoken Sermons* 314). Although Karl’s extreme generosity of spirit may strain the credulity of MacDonald’s readers, the narrative does succeed in functioning as a remarkable parable, built using all the conventional images of the gothic genre, illustrating these principles, and, by extension, the theological belief that whoever refuses to forgive others will inevitably, if temporarily, estrange him or herself from a happy ending in God’s economy of universal salvation. MacDonald’s theology admits no other practical alternative:

God holds the unforgiving man with his hand, but turns his face away from him. If, in his desire to see the face of his Father, he turns his own towards his brother, then the face of God turns round and seeks his, for then the man may look upon God and not die. (*Unspoken Sermons* 57)

MacDonald pleads even more fervently for the forgiveness of willful malefactors in his poem “The Haunted House” first published in 1883 in *A Threefold Cord*, a collection of poetry edited by MacDonald and including poems written by Greville Matheson and John Hill MacDonald. MacDonald again uses the image of a house, a haunted house, to depict the toll that sin takes upon those guilty of the worst transgressions including adultery and murder:

Ha! look there! look at that house—
 Forsaken of all things—beetle and mouse!
 Mark how it looks! It must have a soul!
 It looks, it looks, though it cannot stir!
 See the ribs of it, how they stare!
 Its blind eyes yet have a seeing air!
 It *knows* it has a soul!
 Haggard it hangs o’er the slimy pool,
 And gapes wide open as corpses gape:
 It is the very murderer!
 The ghost has modelled himself to the shape
 Of this drear house all sodden with woe
 Where the deed was done, long, long ago, . . . (66-78)

The house, importantly, is not only evil, but aware of its own state—

because, as MacDonald writes, not only does it have a soul, it “*knows* it has a soul.” This self-awareness introduces the possibility of regret and, perhaps, repentance. As the poem continues, however, the atmosphere of evil becomes so intolerably oppressive that even the narrator begins to feel its threat and cries out for the destruction of both the house and the crimes that it uniquely symbolizes. In desperation the wind is invoked to:

Rend me this ghastly house of groans!
 Rend and scatter the skeleton's bones
 Over the deserts and mountains bare!
 Blast and hurl and shiver aside
 Nail sticks and mortared stones!
 Clear the phantom, with torrent and tide,
 Out of the moon and out of my brain,
 That the light may fall shadowless in again! (120-127)

The narrator is struck with the desperate realization, however, that the mere physical destruction of the house will not undo the horrible deed. That, “. . . the ghost/O'er mountain and coast/Would go roaming, roaming! [...]" (128-130) – that, in short, the evil would continue to exist in an itinerant fashion because it cannot be undone. Finally, on the brink of despair, the narrator calls upon the victims of the original crimes, the men, women, and children so cruelly abandoned or murdered, to forgive the perpetrators whose lot he describes as even more pitiful and dire than their own:

Come, sad woman, whose tender throat
 Has a red-lipped mouth that can sing no note!
 Child, whose midwife, the third grim Fate,
 Shears in hand, thy coming did wait!
 Father, with blood-bedabbled hair!
 Mother, all withered with love's despair!
 Come, broken heart, whatever thou be,
 Hasten to help this misery!
 Thou wast only murdered, or left forlorn:
 He is a horror, a hate, a scorn! (142-151)

All of this is necessary because unforgiveness is, as MacDonald writes elsewhere, a worse sin even than murder itself: “It may be an infinitely less

evil to murder a man than to refuse to forgive him. The former may be the act of a moment of passion: the latter is the heart's choice" (*Unspoken Sermons* 56). As if this were not difficult enough, MacDonald describes the manner in which forgiveness must be heaped upon the malefactor so that he might experience comfort and ultimate redemption:

Droop around him, a tent of love,
An odour of grace, a fanning dove;
Walk through the house with the healing tune
Of gentle footsteps; banish the shape
Remorse calls up thyself to ape;
Comfort him, dear, with pardon sweet;
Cool his head from its burning heat
With the water of life that laves the feet
Of the throne of God, and the holy street! (161-169)

Just as MacDonald was originally drawn to the doctrine of universal redemption by an acute awareness of his own sinfulness, his narrator realizes while he pleads the case of the malefactors, he is also pleading for himself. When he turns again to contemplate the horror stricken aspect of the moon, he understands that it beholds not only the sinfulness of a murderer or adulterer—but his own sinful soul that has not yet run its full course and so might sin ever more grievously—and that his only hope for redemption is in the assurance that others will also receive grace:

But why is the moon so bare, up there?
And why is she so white?
[...]
Thou the reason canst divine:
Into *thee* the moon doth stare
With pallid, terror-smitten air!
Thou, and the Horror lonely-stark,
Outcast of eternal dark,
And in nature same and one,
And *thy* story is not done! (188-189, 201-207)

Unlike Le Fanu's antagonists who plead for mercy and find that "the attempt only fills [them] with confusion and terror" (34), MacDonald seeks

to assure those who repent that forgiveness will eventually and inevitably follow. But forgiveness is not to be assumed lightly: it requires, as “The Cruel Painter” shows, an acknowledgement of wrongdoing on the part of the sinner, repentance, a subsequent purgative suffering, and only then final redemption. It is an argument that is based, for MacDonald, not on the social causality of sin, but the doctrine of the Fall and our own individual choice to abandon God’s love in favor of our own selfishness. Importantly, the poem includes a prayer that God will induce genuine regret in the malefactors so that they will be able to experience his love and redemption. Otherwise, it becomes an unfathomable mystery that God would deign even to hold them in existence:¹⁴

O God, he is but a living blot,
 Yet he lives by thee—for if thou wast not,
 They would vanish together, self-forgot,
 He and his crime: –one breathing blown
 From thy spirit on his would all atone,
 Scatter the horror, and bring relief,
 In an amber dawn of holy grief!
 God, give him sorrow; arise from within,
 His primal being, deeper than sin! (170-178)

If it is possible, even inevitable, that sinners will repent, it is a natural consequence that those wronged will also need to extend forgiveness to their enemies.¹⁵ God, in fact, requires that victims forgive aggressors because there is no victim who has not also been an aggressor and who therefore does not also stand in need of forgiveness: “With our forgiveness to our neighbour, in flows the consciousness of God’s forgiveness to us. . .” (*Unspoken Sermons* 57). God, moreover, will never himself refuse to forgive a repentant sinner for that “would be the same unforgivingness for which he refuses to forgive man” (*Unspoken Sermons* 59). The only reason that MacDonald can see for holding that God would not forgive, regardless of circumstances, is that God *could not* forgive, that “Jesus . . . has been less strong than the adversary, the destroyer. What then shall I say to such a doctrine of devils as that, even if a man did repent, God would not or could not forgive him?” (*Unspoken Sermons* 59). It is, of course, a rhetorical question. Just as Karl must forgive and be willing to free himself from his *justifiable* burden of hate towards Teufelsbürst, so too must the victims of these more egregious

crimes of murder and adultery “be delivered from the hell of [their] hate” (*Unspoken Sermons* 57). Because of its improbability, however, it remains as difficult a literary construct as it is a practical doctrine.

In his short tale “The Gray Wolf,” first published in 1871 in volume 10 of *Works of Fancy and Imagination*, MacDonald explores the nature of remorse from the perspective of an antagonist whose psychological makeup is both complex and conflicted. It follows some of the gothic genre’s later developments in two ways. Like Polidori’s “The Vampyre,” it is not set in distant lands, nor is there any attempt made to explain away its supernatural elements. The realism that its local setting implies, together with its inscrutable supernaturalism and psychological complexity, are doubtless what have caused at least one other critic to describe it as “one of the swiftest, shortest, and least obtainable of MacDonald’s tales” (Sutherland 109).

The story opens with a student wandering carelessly among the Orkney and Shetland Islands after becoming separated from several of his companions. He is caught in a sudden storm and discovers a small ledge on the side of a cliff that seems to afford some relief from the elements—but it is a refuge that is ominously littered with bones. It is in this place that the student encounters the story’s antagonist, a she-werewolf, in her human guise. Like Teufelsbrüst, she is single-minded in her pursuit of an illicit gratification—but where his motivations were intellectual and aesthetic, hers are primitive and animalistic: she wishes only to sate her physical appetite by killing and consuming whatever unsuspecting creatures cross her path. Unlike the painter, however, the satisfaction of her appetite seems to be accompanied simultaneously by a sincere and vexing remorse.

Her werewolf designs begin to emerge in subtle though unsettling ways after she leads the student away to her mother’s cottage with a promise of shelter for the night. Once inside the student catches a glimpse of “her blue eyes . . . fixed upon him with a strange look of greed, amounting to craving . . .” (297). When she is drinking from a cup later that evening the student even observes what seems to be a physical change: “Her hair smoothed itself back, and drew her forehead backwards with it; while the lower part of her face projected towards the bowl, revealing, ere she sipped, her dazzling teeth in strange prominence” (299). Finally, that night after the cottage’s occupants might be expected to slumber, threat gives way to outright violence when the student wakes suddenly to see “the gleaming eyes and grinning teeth of some animal close to his face. Its claws were in his shoulder, and its mouth in the act of seeking his throat” (300). After a

brief but intense struggle, the student manages to wound the animal and drive it off.

The next morning the she-werewolf returns, in her human guise, showing signs of remorse for her nocturnal aggression: “She looked ill and faint, and when she raised her eyes, all their fierceness had vanished, and sadness had taken its place” (302). When the student observes the wound on the girl he suddenly deduces that she and the wolf are one and the same and in terror bolts for the cottage door. Before he can effect his escape, however, he turns to see a huge gray wolf bounding toward him. Amazingly, as he readies himself for what seems an inevitable assault, he discovers that:

. . . the creature as she sprung eluded his grasp, and just as he expected to feel her fangs, he found a woman weeping on his bosom, with her arms around his neck. The next instant, the gray wolf broke from him, and bounded howling up the cliff. (303)

What causes her to relent is difficult to say. Perhaps it is the enormity of the sin itself—human murder—that stays her appetite. The bones scattered about the ledge at the story’s beginning are, after all, described as being “. . . of many small animals” (295). But because the physical transformation between girl and wolf is so dramatic, and because the werewolf alone seems to violently aggress, it is tempting to believe that the girl herself is innocent and merely the victim of a monster within. MacDonald suggests as much elsewhere, writing that “Even in the case of a man driven by appetite and passion, it is impossible to say how much is to be attributed to the man himself, and how much to that lower nature in him which he ought to keep in subjection, but which, having been allowed to get the upper hand, has become a possessing demon” (*Miracles of Our Lord* 356). To attribute everything to the “lower nature” in this case, however, would be to deny the part the human girl plays in the student’s initial entrapment, her greedy albeit human eyes, and, perhaps most interestingly, the werewolf herself bounding away at the very moment the student would have been most vulnerable to attack. Instead, the girl and the she-werewolf seem to be a single though conflicted individual who struggles with an almost overpowering temptation for slaughter and who must endure a consequent self-loathing. It is here perhaps more than in any other gothic tale that MacDonald approaches the convention of his Victorian contemporaries who attempt to stir up reader sympathy for a criminal caught in unusually trying circumstances. But for

MacDonald the difficulties are not purely social and external—they arise from a state of spiritual disorder within. Her internal conflict is underlined one final time when, after this unsettling encounter, the departing student hears “the sound of a crunching of bones—not as if a creature was eating them, but as if they were ground by the teeth of rage and disappointment” (303). Significantly, however, she does allow him to pass and makes no further attempt to follow him.

So while the she-werewolf remains a complex psychological portrait, an image of St. Paul’s admission “I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do” (Rom. 7:15), it is not possible to say with assurance that she, in allowing the student to escape, has not taken her first step on the path toward redemption. While considering the nature of “the unpardonable sin” (*Unspoken Sermons* 58; cf. Mark 3:29) MacDonald writes of Judas’s own self-loathing becoming so acute that his “life, self, soul, became worthless in his eyes and met with no mercy at his own hand” (*Unspoken Sermons* 64). In spite of his suicide, however, MacDonald goes on to write that when his spirit “fled from his hanged and fallen body, he fled to the tender help of Jesus, and found it—I say not how. He was in a more hopeful condition now than during any moment of his past life, for he had never repented before” (*Unspoken Sermons* 64; cf. Matt. 27:4-6). How much more might MacDonald expect his reader to intuit that the she-werewolf could find mercy whose remorse is as evident but whose crime remains unconsummated? While there are fewer warrants here than in the case of the cruel painter, the story’s end does seem to suggest an antagonist in “a more hopeful condition” than at its beginning. There remains, in short, room for salvation.

It is not surprising that the story in which MacDonald seems most to depart from his universalism is the one that has been recognized and anthologized as a gothic tale. “Uncle Cornelius His Story” was first published in *St. Paul’s Magazine* in January 1869 and was recently included in *Victorian Ghost Stories: An Oxford Anthology* (1991) edited by Michael Cox and R.A. Gilbert.¹⁶ Of all MacDonald’s stories that might be described as broadly falling within this genre, this one has most in common with the gothic tales written by his contemporaries: it offers not only an uncanny atmosphere, but also seems to end in the retributive eternal punishment of a ghost and her descendant for the lifelong practice of penury and greed.

Though certainly no fairy tale, the story is narrated by Uncle Cornelius to his young nieces and nephews. After a lengthy preliminary discussion

about ghosts and the nature of belief—Uncle Cornelius confounds his young audience by refusing to admit belief or disbelief in such creatures except to say that “we are ghosts . . . within this body” (315)—he begins to narrate in the first person a story that, while he insists is not a ghost story, “will look like one” (319). This preamble serves to gently introduce the reader to the story’s supernatural elements without attempting to explain them away. For this reason, it might strike the reader as less confounding than the “The Gray Wolf” where no such preamble is offered and supernatural events must be taken wholly at face value.

While staying in the house of a friend, Cornelius wakes one night to find at the bureau in his room a ghostly figure of an old woman “looking at a faded brown paper . . . Ancient household records, in rusty ink, held up to the glimpses of the waning moon, which shone through the parting in the curtains, their entries of shillings and pence!” (332-333). Cornelius recognizes immediately that her efforts are not only futile but also in themselves a type of torment to her. He recoils at the thought that “the hundred nameless trifles of a life utterly vanished, should be perplexing, annoying, and worst of all, interesting the soul of a ghost who had been in Hades for centuries!” (333). The next day, Cornelius says nothing of the appearance to either his host or his host’s beautiful young sister, Laetitia, with whom he has fallen in love. As the days pass, however, he seems less and less enchanted with the young woman for reasons he finds difficult to articulate. On Christmas Day, as others venture to church, he retires to his room with a headache. After waking from a slumber he perceives a figure at the same bureau and—after the initial shock—approaches to find it is no ghost keeping accounts this Christmas Day—but Laetitia herself. He tries in vain to turn her from the parsimonious accounts, fearing that she, like the ghost of her ancestor, will become obsessed with them to the exclusion of all else. Many years later—on the very same day that Uncle Cornelius relates his story to his young nieces and nephews—he receives word that Laetitia has died keeping accounts at the same bureau. After hearing the story, one niece observes:

“It’s very sad . . . but I don’t see the good of it all. If the ghost had come to tell that she had hidden away money in some secret place in the old bureau, one would see why she had been permitted to come back. But what was the good of those accounts after they were over and done with? I don’t believe in the ghost.” (340)

Cornelius's rejoinder is as chilling as anything one can find in MacDonald: ". . . but those wretched accounts were not over and done with, you see. That is the misery of it" (340). And so the story ends with the apparent damnation of both the ghostly ancestor and the once youthful Laetitia. At least, this is almost certainly what a reader of an anthology who has just encountered other representative tales of the genre might be expected to conclude. But such a reading might be too hasty.

The young niece seems to think there must be some good in the appearance of the ghost—even if that good does not extend beyond the revelation of some paltry cache of money. But perhaps a greater good was intended—and thwarted by Laetitia's resolve in keeping her miserly accounts? And, though the accounts are "not over and done with," can the reader reasonably conclude, in light of MacDonald's other stories, that they shall remain so forever? Although her persistence seems the very image of MacDonald's description of the unpardonable sin against the Holy Spirit where sinners are carried away not "by wild passion, but by cold self-love, and envy, and avarice, and ambition" (*Unspoken Sermons* 61), MacDonald makes clear in his theology, if not in this story, that final persistence is impossible:

But I do not believe that it is a fixed, a final condition. I do not see why it should be such any more than that of the man who does not forgive his neighbour. If you say it is a worse offence, I say, is it too bad for the forgiveness of God? (*Unspoken Sermons* 62)

MacDonald goes on to argue that the only possible final state he can imagine other than redemption is not a hell of torment, but annihilation. The very existence of MacDonald's ghosts, therefore, seems to imply that hope somehow exists along with them. Nor are they, like the elder Hamlet's ghost, shadowy and close to nothingness: "There is no weakness in the ghost. It is but to the imperfect human sense that he is shadowy. To himself he knows his doom is his deliverance; . . ." ("Elder Hamlet" 175). Although faint, perhaps hope, even here, is not wholly extinguished.

MacDonald's whole imaginative output was shaped and formed by his belief that God will stir forgiveness in every hardened heart, transform every monster into a repentant child, and supply the losses of every sinful act. The expression of these beliefs in word and story led to the creation of a body of enduring children's literature and two extraordinarily original

mythopoeic novels that stood outside the boundaries of any recognizable genre of their time. When writing within the relatively fixed genre of gothic literature, however, MacDonald recast whatever elements he found to be fundamentally incompatible with his theology: while he had no quarrel with incorporating ghosts, vampires, and werewolves into his tales since “they are not essential to salvation” (“Uncle Cornelius His Story” 311), the dark moral economies and punishing gods of other writers such as Le Fanu could not be tolerated. The world itself must remain good and God the final guarantor of everyone’s safety. The closest approach MacDonald’s theology would allow him to make to a tragic ending was an ambiguous one. It is perhaps worth observing that MacDonald would probably have found more to admire in some of the today’s recent pop culture gothic offerings, from Guillermo del Toro’s *Hellboy* to Joss Whedon’s repentant soul-imbued vampires, than he did in the gothic literature of his own time.

NOTES

¹See, for example, Soto’s “Chthonic Aspects of MacDonald’s Phantastes” and Petzold’s “Beasts and Monsters and MacDonald’s Fantasy Stories”.

²Baldick’s introduction to *The Oxford Book of Gothic Tales* provides an excellent survey of the difficulties involved in defining the literary gothic.

³“The Watcher,” first published in the *Dublin University Magazine* in 1847, was subsequently published in the collection *Ghost Stories and Tales of Mystery* (1851). It later appeared, shifted from the third to the first person, under the title “The Familiar” in the second edition of *Ghost Stories and Tales of Mystery* (1872).

⁴See Pettit 281-4. For a comprehensive overview of moral responsibility and punishment with particular reference to the Victorian novel see Rodensky *passim*.

⁵For a succinct overview of the genre’s evolving moral economies between 1764 and 1820, see Bleiler’s introduction to *Three Gothic Novels*, especially pp. xii-xvi.

⁶Ann Radcliff is noteworthy among gothic writers for depicting the “beleaguered heroine [who] against all realistic odds, find[s] her way to a happy ending” (Tracy 104).

⁷MacDonald dedicated his book *The Miracles of Our Lord* (1870) to Maurice.

⁸This is a quote from MacDonald’s novel *Weighed and Wanting*. Another critic remarks “As it happens, it is often fairly safe to take what a narrator says to the reader of a MacDonald novel as indeed representing what MacDonald, in his own person, wants the reader to think . . .” (Robb 4). MacDonald’s son and biographer clearly thought this to be the case here.

⁹For MacDonald’s argument concerning the salvation of animals see *Hope of the Gospel* 190-224.

¹⁰MacDonald, who insisted that God saved us from sin and not from the punishment of sin, observed, “Better the reformers had kept their belief in purgatory, and parted with what is called vicarious sacrifice!” (*Unspoken Sermons* 526). See also Raeper 252.

¹¹Failing to recognize it as properly gothic, Raeper dismisses this story in passing as no more than “a tale of cruelty and mock vampirism, whimpering out in a rather pathetic joke” (316).

¹²It is likely that MacDonald encountered this story while cataloguing a private library as a young man in northern Scotland (*George MacDonald and His Wife* 72). For a good modern translation see Barber 10-13. Although Barber cites as his source a collection of Prussian folklore published by Johann Grässe in 1868, MacDonald’s own source must have been an earlier one since his story appeared in 1864.

¹³Karl’s unselfish love is in marked contrast to another of MacDonald’s protagonists, Cosmo in *Phantastes*. Like Karl, Cosmo is also a university student in Prague. He falls in love with a young woman enspelled by a magical mirror. Cosmo can either free her by smashing the mirror (and allowing her to come—or not come—to him freely) or guard the mirror and keep her in thrall. Unlike Karl he fails to chose in her best interest. (See also Sutherland 52).

¹⁴For a consideration of hell as annihilation see *Unspoken Sermons* 63.

¹⁵In considering whether a sinner confronted with the truth of his transgressions might refuse to repent, MacDonald writes, “I think it may be. And wiser people than I, have thought so. I have difficulty in believing it, I say; yet I think it must be so. But I do not believe that it is a fixed, a final condition. I do not see why it should be such any more than that of the man who does not forgive his neighbour. If you say it is a worse offence, I say, Is it too bad for the forgiveness of God?” (*Unspoken Sermons* 62).

¹⁶Although Cox and Gilbert describe the Victorian ghost story as “anti-gothic” because it is “typically domestic” and “seeks to blur the boundaries between fact and fiction” (x), it remains, in fact, a subgenre of the wider gothic tradition in its use of stock figures and retributive moral economies. Nor is the boundary they propose inviolable even within individual tales. Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, for example, straddles the exotic and the domestic by opening with a journey to the almost incredibly remote ancestral castle of Dracula in Transylvania, only to relocate the action to contemporary London.

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