

George MacDonald, Julia Kristeva, and the Black Sun

Author(s): William N. Gray

Source: *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, Vol. 36, No. 4, Nineteenth Century (Autumn, 1996), pp. 877-893

Published by: Rice University

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/450980>

Accessed: 23-08-2018 10:50 UTC

REFERENCES

Linked references are available on JSTOR for this article:

https://www.jstor.org/stable/450980?seq=1&cid=pdf-reference#references_tab_contents

You may need to log in to JSTOR to access the linked references.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

Rice University is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*

George MacDonald, Julia Kristeva, and the Black Sun

WILLIAM N. GRAY

Most of the main critical readings of George MacDonald's *Phantastes* have recognized that the text is highly susceptible of a Freudian or (more frequently) a Jungian interpretation. Robert Lee Wolff's ground-breaking book *The Golden Key: A Study of the Fiction of George MacDonald* is, if not actually a vulgar Freudian reading, then certainly an example of what Norman Holland has called "first phase" psychoanalytic criticism, intent on disinterring the latent content (a literary game popularly known as "spot the phallic symbol").¹ But however unsatisfactory Wolff's psychoanalytic reading of *Phantastes* may have been, it does not seem necessary on that account to turn instead (as Edmund Cusick has argued) to Jungian psychology.² Unlike some other commentators (e.g., Richard Reis, C. N. Manlove, William Raeper) who seem to take it for granted that Carl Jung's approach and terminology have some kind of natural resonance with MacDonald's writing,³ Cusick does *argue* that we need to choose between the Freudian and Jungian approaches, and that the latter is more helpful. Cusick concedes that his opposition between Sigmund Freud and Jung is very crude, but somehow he manages to blame this on Wolff.⁴ However, the fact that in 1961 Wolff was interested in the latent content of MacDonald's work hardly justifies Cusick in claiming thirty years later that Freudian approaches *as such* are only interested in latent content, thus leaving the Jungian approach as the only viable option.

William N. Gray is in the English Department at the Chichester Institute of Higher Education, England. He has published essays on several German writers, including Goethe and Gadamer, and on psychoanalytic theory, as well as on George MacDonald.

On the contrary, there have of course been major developments in Freudian approaches since the first phase id-psychology and its rather narrow concern with latent content. The term “Freudian approaches” should surely include the work not only of Anna Freud, Melanie Klein, Donald Winnicott, and Erik Erikson, but also of Jacques Lacan and Julia Kristeva (not to mention the later writings of Freud himself). Indeed *pace* Cusick and the Jungians, it seems to me that the best reading of MacDonald in terms of depth psychology is still that sketched out by David Holbrook in his 1983 introduction to *Phantastes*, a reading which is certainly Freudian, though it is heavily influenced by the British “object-relations” school, and especially by Winnicott.⁵ Holbrook’s interpretation focuses on the themes of death, melancholy, and the longing for a lost maternal love, and in particular reads *Phantastes* as a quest for what was lost in a premature and traumatic weaning. Even apart from the remarkable biographical evidence we happen to have to support such a reading,⁶ it is difficult to resist Holbrook’s interpretation of the novel as a quest for the beginnings of being or identity in what Erik Erikson called “the primary maternal matrix,” or we might call, following Kristeva, the *chora*. Rather than rehearse Holbrook’s argument here, I propose to take further his psychoanalytical reading of *Phantastes* by using some themes in the more recent writings of Julia Kristeva. Although Kristeva is deeply influenced by Lacan, she also departs from him in certain respects, and links back in some interesting ways precisely to those “object-relations” theorists (Klein, W. R. D. Fairbairn, and Winnicott) who influenced Holbrook. The texts by Kristeva which seem to link most interestingly with *Phantastes* are: *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*; *Tales of Love*; and, above all, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*.

The opening of *Phantastes* could be described in several respects as liminal or having to do with the borderline. The hero, whose name Anodos means “pathless” or also perhaps “the way up” or “the way back,” has just reached the age of twenty-one, and has been invested with various legal rights, including access to his late father’s papers contained in an old secretary. However, this so-to-speak transition into the symbolic order is far from straightforward; there is something uncanny in these opening pages, a sense of anxiety. Anodos is driven by a curiosity about his father’s personal history to break into a secret compartment in the secretary where he finds some withered rose leaves, a small packet of papers, and a “tiny woman-form,” who proceeds to berate men, who are only convinced by “mere repetition.” “But I am not going to argue with you” she

says, "but to grant you a wish."⁷ The wish however, was never put into words, but rather conveyed by the sigh with which Anodos had on the previous evening answered his sister's question about fairy-land, after she had read him a fairy-tale. Fairy-land, in MacDonald's writing, has to do with the pre-linguistic or the semiotic, and is very much the realm of "the mothers." As Anodos's fairy grandmother points out, while he may know something about his male ancestors, he knows very little about his great-grandmothers on either side. When Anodos again tries to argue with her, she replies: "Never mind what I seem to think. You shall find the way into Fairy-land tomorrow. Now look into my eyes" (p. 5). Eagerly Anodos does so: "They filled me with an unknown longing. I remembered somehow that my mother died when I was a baby. I looked deeper and deeper, till they spread around me like seas, and I sank in their waters. I forgot all the rest" (p. 5). Anodos has a vision of a sea "sweeping into bays and round capes and islands, away, away, I know not whither" (p. 5). But this suggestion of *jouissance*, of an ecstatic loss of self in the unlimited, in the "oceanic feeling," is a mirage. "Alas! it was no sea, but a low bog burnished by the moon" (p. 6). The "real" is not so easily encountered; it demands a journey deep into Fairy-land.

Anodos's journey begins when his room quite literally dissolves into Fairy-land. The figures in his carpet, which he had himself designed in imitation of grass and daisies, "bent and swayed with every motion of the changeful current, as if they were about to dissolve with it, and forsaking their fixed form, become fluent as the waters" (p. 7). The realm of representation, of which Anodos had thought himself in control, what we might call the realm of the symbolic, begins to slip and slide into what Kristeva says in *Tales of Love* is "the very space of metaphorical shifting."⁸ Here we move into a realm that is, as we shall see, not able to be represented, but only evoked in sound, rhythm, color, music, above all poetry; the realm of the semiotic, "the maternal vessel," where "metaphor . . . as if to blur all reference . . . ends up as synesthesia."⁹

Anodos's first encounter in Fairy-land is with a rather strange country maiden who informs him of what to expect from the various trees who turn out to be some of the major characters in *Phantastes*. The main villains will turn out to be the Ash who is an ogre and the Alder who "will smother you with her web of hair, if you let her near you at night" (p. 10). In this and the following chapter the threatening presence of the Ash gradually intensifies, culminating in a genuinely chilling account of a

chase through the woods when the Ash almost catches up with Anodos. Characteristic of the Ash are his admittedly rather phallic fingers—described as “bulbous,” with “knotty joints and protuberances”—which contribute to Holbrook’s interpretation of the Ash in oedipal terms.¹⁰ However, such a reading does not altogether fit what is most striking and uncanny in his appearance; he has no center: “I saw the strangest figure; vague, shadowy, almost transparent, in the central parts, and gradually deepening in substance towards the outside, until it ended in extremities capable of casting such a shadow as fell from the hand, through the awful fingers of which I now saw the moon” (pp. 30–1). MacDonald was fond of playing around with the categories of outside/inside; here he seems to be saying that the Ash has no inside or, as it is put later, “has a hole in his heart that nobody knows of but one or two; and he is always trying to fill it up, but he cannot. That must be what he wanted you for” (p. 35). Rather than identifying the Ash as an avenging oedipal father-figure, one might take literally the indication that he is not yet a man, or in psychoanalytical terms, not yet an object. The Ash seems more like Kristeva’s abject, that which is not yet clearly one thing or another, that which has not yet separated out into an object or a subject, and whose threat resides precisely in this borderline, undecided status in which the inside is not clearly demarcated from the outside. The abject can also pose in a primitive way threats which only crystallize more sharply at the oedipal stage. Thus the threatening Ash may *anticipate* the avenging oedipal father-figure, but the anxiety and terror here are really more to do with the mother, or more precisely with the mother-infant dyad (since the mother at this stage has not yet become a separate object). Since the inside is still all mixed up with the outside (or the processes of projection and introjection are in continual flux), the terrifying greed and aggression are as much *in the infant* as in the mother. As MacDonald writes: “(the eyes) seemed lighted up with an infinite greed. A gnawing voracity which devoured the devourer, seemed to be the indwelling and propelling power of the whole ghostly apparition. I lay for a few moments simply imbruted with terror” (pp. 31–2). Surely a classic instance of the “biter bit”?

Anodos is saved from the Ash by the entrance of the beech. Again this has been read as the appearance of the oedipal mother; even the fact that the beech-woman is “rather above the human size” is interpreted as indicating the perspective of a child toward his mother (p. 33).¹¹ But again we might take literally the statement that the beech is not yet a woman (p. 34). The beech

seems to embody the holding, the giving, the lulling, the sweetly sensual aspects of the “maternal vessel,” the *chora*. What pervades this section is her “low, musical, murmuring voice,” which is “like a solution of all musical sounds,” and blends in with the sound of the wind in the leaves (p. 34). Then the beech sings “a strange, sweet song which” Anodos says, “I could not understand, but which left in me a feeling like this—” and a short poem follows, after which Anodos says he cannot put more of it into words (p. 36). This is a move typical of MacDonald in which (partly perhaps out of a justified insecurity about his own poetic talent) he claims to offer an inferior version of an original which in its quality, and indeed in its sometimes unknown language, is very different from what the reader is actually given. His own poetry is quite often presented as a pale imitation of some transcendent “song without words.” This idea is related to another favorite MacDonald device of running natural sounds and rhythms in and out of language. The music of the beech-tree reappears in the final page of the novel: “I began to listen to the sounds of the leaves overhead. At first, they made sweet inarticulate music above; but, by-and-by, the sound seemed to begin to take shape, and to be gradually moulding itself into words, till at last, I seemed able to distinguish these, half-dissolved in a little ocean of circumfluent tones” (p. 237). Here again we seem on the borders of the semiotic. MacDonald’s actual poetry may be unremarkable; what is remarkable is the extent to which he privileges the poetic, in a gesture which certainly harks back to Novalis, and seems also to hint forward to Kristeva.

After some further wandering through the woods in which, in the best German Romantic tradition, Anodos “began to feel in some degree what the birds meant in their songs, though [he] could not express it in words, anymore than you can some landscapes” (p. 39), he stumbles into a small cave, in a manner reminiscent of the opening dream sequence of *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*. As in the latter, the cave contains a well or basin with obviously magical properties; and like Heinrich’s cave, Anodos’s “antenatal tomb” contains an image of his ideal woman “more near the face that had been born with me in my soul, than anything I had seen before in nature or art” (pp. 44, 43). But Anodos’s image of the ideal woman takes the form not of nature (as in Heinrich’s “blue flower”) but of art; it is a reclining marble statue, locked in a block of alabaster. After failing to penetrate his ideal woman with his knife, Anodos resorts to the magical power of song to release her. Again this sequence has

been read in fairly vulgar Freudian terms, and it is true that sometimes a knife is obviously not just a knife. But it is again interesting to take a step back from the oedipal scenario where the marble woman is the inaccessible, frigid love object, to the pre-oedipal dyad where the frozen woman represents not only the withheld maternal body (or breast) but also the frozen “false self” of the baby. It is only the power of the semiotic that can break open the castrating hold of the oedipal/symbolic, as well as counteracting the more primitive denial of the maternal body/breast which is also the denial of the emerging infantile self. It is not a case of playing off the pre-oedipal against the oedipal; the former is the condition of the possibility of the latter. And the revolution of poetic language needs to be perpetual, for as soon as the frozen maternal body has been released by the semiotic pulse of song, it is immediately lost again, leaving Anodos in despair by the forsaken cave.

Anodos sets off in quest of his “white lady,” and almost immediately comes across the Knight, Sir Percival, about whom he had previously read in the fairy cottage, and who in his rusty armor is literally a picture of dejection or perhaps of abjection. In his defiled armor, Percival is an outsider, “jettisoned from the symbolic system” as Kristeva puts it in *Powers of Horror*,¹² and also uncannily like the disinherited Knight of Gérard de Nerval’s “El Desdichado” (“The Disinherited”) which gives Kristeva her title *Black Sun*.¹³ Percival’s problem is that he has been tainted by his encounter with the evil Alder-maiden. Anodos has been warned. As he continues his quest for his lost lady of the marble, he experiences an ecstatic sense of union with Mother Earth: “Earth drew me towards her bosom: I felt as if I could fall down and kiss her” (p. 50). “In the midst of this ecstasy” the idea that somewhere his lady was “waiting (might it not be?) to meet and thank her deliverer in a twilight which would veil her confusion” turns the whole night into “one dream-realm of joy” (p. 51). The very thought of such a night of love leads to an involuntary semiotic outburst of song, which draws the response near to him of “a low delicious laugh.” “It was not the laugh of one who would not be heard, but the laugh of one who has just received something long and patiently desired—a laugh that ends in a low musical moan” (p. 52). Announcing herself as indeed his “white lady,” and thus “sending a thrill of speechless delight through a heart which all the love-dreams of the preceding day and evening had been tempering for this culminating hour” (p. 52), the mysterious female figure invites Anodos to her grotto. There she entrances him with a tale of love: “I

listened till she and I were blended with the tale; till she and I were the whole history . . . What followed I cannot clearly remember. The succeeding horror almost obliterated it" (p. 55).

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

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

(pp. 13–4)

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

But although saved from "unfathomable horror" by the as yet unnamed Knight, Anodos enters the depression which will haunt the remainder of the book. The daylight has become hateful to him, "and the thought of the great, innocent, bold sunrise unendurable" (p. 57). The birds are singing; but not for him. After an interlude in a farm-house which contains one of the many nurturing mothers in the book, Anodos comes to a different kind of house containing a different kind of mother: this is the house of the ogre, or as it will later be called, "the Church of Darkness." The epigraph to this chapter is from the "Mother Night" speech of Mephistopheles in Goethe's *Faust*: "I am a part of the part, which at first was the whole."¹⁴ The epigraph is directly relevant to this chapter, for Anodos finds in this house a woman reading aloud from "an ancient little volume" what amounts to a kind of hymn to darkness. This could certainly be seen as an inversion of Christian Orthodoxy, and seems in part to be derived from the passage from *Faust* which provides this chapter's epigraph. However, there is another, perhaps less obvious, intertext at this point. For what the woman reads in the ancient volume bears a strong resemblance to Novalis's *Hymns to the Night*, which MacDonald must have known in the 1850s and would later translate (in 1852 he had already published a translation of Novalis's *Spiritual Songs*). Whether we take the Goethe intertext, in which the "spirit of negation" is the unwilling servant of the greater good, and darkness cannot in the end prevent the triumph of light, or whether we take the Novalis intertext in which night is positively hymned as the great Mother, in neither case is darkness seen unambiguously as evil absolute. Like the German Romantics who influenced him, and indeed like some postmodern thinkers with whom MacDonald has been compared, he resisted absolute dualisms, or binary oppositions.¹⁵ The Shadow which Anodos acquires in the Church of Darkness after his intrusion into the forbidden cupboard is a necessary Shadow; his fall here is a *felix culpa*. Kristeva, too, in her *Powers of Horror* refers to the *felix culpa* idea in the chapter entitled "Qui tollis peccata mundi." She talks of Duns Scotus's spiritual revolution, which allowed the

remission of sin by bringing sin into speech in confession and absolution: "It is owing to speech, at any rate, that the lapse has a chance of becoming fortunate: *felix culpa* is merely a phenomenon of enunciation."¹⁶ Underlying Kristeva's theological point is a psychoanalytical one: to acquire a subject position in language, in the symbolic order, requires a breaking loose from, a rejection of, the abject, ultimately the mother. The fault which is necessary and ultimately blessed is matricide, for matricide is the condition of the possibility of subjectivity and speech. She writes provocatively in *Black Sun*: "Matricide is our vital necessity, the sine-qua-non of our individuation" (pp. 27–8).

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

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

the *Märchen* (given in the epigraph to the whole novel) but it is also, according to Kristeva, related to melancholia.¹⁷ Whether it results from “an inversion of aggressiveness” or from some other cause, “the phenomenon that might be described as a *breakdown of biological and logical sequentiality* finds its radical manifestation in melancholia” (*Black Sun*, p. 20). What Kristeva calls “shattered concatenation” or simply “non-concatenation” is for her a result of the failure to mourn successfully the archaic maternal pre-object, “the Thing.” She writes later in *Black Sun*: “From the analyst’s point of view, the possibility of concatenating signifiers (words or actions) appears to depend upon going through mourning for an archaic and indispensable object . . . Mourning for the Thing—such a possibility comes out of transposing, beyond loss and on an imaginary or symbolic level, the imprints of an interchange with the other articulated according to a certain order” (p. 40).

More simply put: “If I did not agree to lose mother, I could neither imagine nor name her” (p. 41). It is significant that Anodos says that his inability to give “a consecutive account” of his wanderings lasts until he arrives at the palace of Fairy Land (p. 72). Anodos’s stay in the palace is at the center of *Phantastes*, and central to his time there are the hours spent reading in the marvelous palace library. Reading in this library is a magical experience. Anodos finds that his identity is taken over by the text; he *becomes* the text, or conversely, the text gives him an identity. One of the stories he reads forms the central chapter of *Phantastes*. This story is a Hoffmannesque tale within a tale about Cosmo von Wehrstahl, a student in Prague, though of course as Anodos says: “while I read it, I was Cosmo, and his history was mine. Yet, all the time, I seemed to have a kind of double-consciousness, and the story a double meaning” (p. 106). Cosmo/Anodos/the reader (for as Stephen Prickett says, this *Bildungsroman* is above all about the formation of the reader)¹⁸ acquires a magic mirror in which he discovers in his *reflected* room a beautiful woman with whom he falls obsessively in love. The tale is about Cosmo’s quest to be united with the object of his longing desire, which he only achieves in the end at the cost of his own death, after having smashed the mirror. That the center of this *Bildungsroman* should be occupied by a tale about a magic mirror, which is explicitly compared with the imagination (pp. 112–3), invites reference to Lacan’s “mirror stage” and “the imaginary.” Yet more interesting from Kristeva’s point of view is the way that here the concept of identity, union with the loved object, and a death which borders on suicide

come together in a kind of *jouissance*. This mutual interplay of the themes of identity, love, the maternal, and death by suicide, dominates the remainder of *Phantastes*.

After the mirror episode, in a scene which reverses the ending of Novalis's *Märchen* "Hyacinth and Roseblossom," Anodos finally unveils his Isis only to have her writhe from his arms and disappear, leaving him desolate. He continues his journey "with a dull endurance, varied by moments of uncontrollable sadness" and comes to a bleak shoreline, "bare and waste, and gray" (pp. 157, 159). The following powerful evocation of desolation and despair, which one critic thinks may be in part a response to Arnold's "Dover Beach," seen in manuscript form,¹⁹ culminates in the simple statement: "I could bear it no longer" (p. 159). Anodos throws himself into the sea: "I . . . gazed into the heaving abyss beneath me; then plunged headlong . . . A blessing, like the kiss of a mother, seemed to alight on my soul; a calm, deeper than that which accompanies a hope deferred, bathed my spirit. I sank far into the waters, and sought not to return. I felt as if once more the great arms of the beech-tree were around me, soothing me after the miseries I had passed through, and telling me, like a little sick child, that I should be better tomorrow" (p. 160).

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

Suicide is the way back to "the non integrated self's lost paradise, one without others or limits, a fantasy of untouchable fullness" (p. 20). And it is quite fitting that Anodos's way should now take him back to the most explicitly maternal figure in the book, the wise old woman with young eyes who lives in a magic cottage. It is fitting because, according to Kristeva, the act of suicide is a way of avoiding matricide, which is, as we have seen, "our vital necessity, the sine-qua-non condition of our individuation" (pp. 27–8). She writes in the same passage in *Black Sun*:

“The lesser or greater violence of matricidal drive . . . entails, when it is hindered, its inversion on the self: the maternal object having been introjected, the depressive or melancholic putting to death of the self is what follows, instead of matricide. In order to protect mother I kill myself” (p. 28). Having killed himself, Anodos has saved his all-providing mother: “While she sung, I was in Elysium . . . I felt as if she could give me everything I wanted; as if I should never wish to leave her, but would be content to be sung to and fed by her, day after day, as years rolled by” (p. 171). Anodos does nevertheless attempt to leave her by going through each of the four doors in the cottage, but returns each time after having encountered, respectively: the death of his brother; the disappearance of the Knight and his lady behind an obviously parental bedroom door; a dead lover and/or mother; what lay behind the fourth door he cannot bring to consciousness. In other words, behind each door lies obviously oedipal material which Anodos cannot face; he must return to “the floor of the cottage, with my head in the lap of the woman, who was weeping over me, and stroking my hair with both hands, talking to me as a mother might talk to a sick and sleeping, or a dead child” (p. 182). However, the old woman finally persuades Anodos to leave, gently pushing him away with the words “Go, my son, and do something worth doing.” The last sentence of this chapter reads: “I felt very desolate as I went” (p. 184).

Nevertheless, in the next section Anodos does do something worth doing. He teams up with two brothers in order to kill three giants who have been terrorizing the countryside, and is fêted as the conquering hero in the court of the grateful king, whose two sons died in defeating the giants. Superficially, then, Anodos seems to have entered the symbolic order; but he is still haunted by the Shadow. As he enters an enchanted wood, the Shadow suddenly disappears. Anodos becomes euphoric and begins to develop an inflated sense of self, until he encounters a more powerful *Doppelgänger* who totally deflates his sense of self-worth, and leads him, cowed, to a “dreary square tower” in which he is imprisoned with his Shadow, which has meanwhile reappeared (p. 205). Again, Kristeva’s version of psychoanalysis seems to fit MacDonald’s text uncannily well. In her discussion of borderline cases in *Powers of Horror* she calls this kind of patient a “fortified castle,” and writes:

Constructed on the one hand by the incestuous desire of (for) his mother and on the other by an overly brutal separation

from her, the borderline patient, even though he may be a fortified castle, is nevertheless an empty castle. The absence, or the failure, of paternal function to establish a unitary bent between subject and object, produces this strange configuration: an encompassment that is stifling . . . and, at the same time, draining. The ego then plunges into a pursuit of identifications that could repair narcissism—identifications that the subject will experience as insignificant, 'empty,' 'null,' 'devitalized,' 'puppet-like'. An empty castle, haunted by unappealing ghosts—'powerless' outside, 'impossible' inside.²⁰

But not for the first time, Anodos is liberated by the semiotic: a song enters his prison-house: "it bathed me like a sea; inwraapt me like an odorous vapour; entered my soul like a long draught of clear spring-water; shone upon me like essential sunlight; soothed me like a mother's voice and hand" (p. 208). Anodos is able now simply to walk out the door of the castle, where he finds the singer, a beautiful woman whose magic globe he had shattered long before, just after he had acquired his Shadow. The woman has, through the power of the Fairy Queen, become a wandering agent of liberation, delivering people by the power of her song. Anodos can now give up his "vain attempt to behold, if not my ideal in myself, at least myself in my ideal" (p. 212); that is, perhaps, the vain pursuit of "in-significant" identifications that would repair narcissism (to use Kristeva's terms). He experiences what ultimately, according to Kristeva, we are all looking for, and especially in psychoanalysis—a new birth: "Another self seemed to arise like a white spirit from a dead man, from the dumb and trampled self of the past. Doubtless, this self must again die and be buried and again from its tomb spring a winged child . . . Self will come to life even in the slaying of self" (p. 212).²¹

Underway again, Anodos once more hears a voice singing, but this time a manly voice. It is the Knight, dragging behind his horse the hideous corpse of a dragon, described in lurid detail, surely an instance of the abject. However, the conquering Knight is hardly the stern oedipal father figure one might perhaps anticipate; rather his feminine qualities are stressed. He has "all the gentleness of a womanly heart" (p. 216); he tends to a wounded child "if possible even more gently than the mother" (p. 217). Anodos begs to become the Knight's squire, and although this could be read in straightforwardly oedipal terms, the Knight has enough of the maternal and the semiotic about him to suggest that he is rather the *Black Sun's* pre-oedipal

“father in individual prehistory” (p. 13); “primary identification” with whom allows reconciliation with loss of “the Thing.” Such reconciliation (or repression), which allows the transition from the pre-symbolic (or pre-object-choice) stage into the symbolic order, is very much the province of religion. As Kristeva says in *Powers of Horror*: “it is within that undecidable space, logically coming before the choice of the sexual object, that the religious answer to abjection breaks in: *defilement, taboo, or sin.*”²² Or *sacrifice*, Kristeva might have added at this point.²³ And indeed it is to a strange religious ceremony that the Knight leads Anodos, where they witness a ritual human sacrifice, in which the victims are devoured by being pushed into a door in a great pedestal supporting an enthroned image. The Knight seems to acquiesce in all this, but Anodos does not. In a violent gesture which resists the institutionalized violence of the sacrifice which founds the symbolic order, he strides up to the image, overthrows it, and grapples with the beast which emerges from the gaping hole under the displaced image. Though he dies in its embrace (and there is a strong suggestion of suicide), Anodos manages to kill the devouring monster. One suspects that although he seems finally to have managed to kill his mother, by dying himself he has achieved ultimate union or identification with her in a state which seems as much pre-natal as post-mortem: “Now that I lay in her bosom, the whole earth, and each of her births, was as a body to me, at my will. I seemed to feel the great heart of the mother beating into mine, and feeding me with her own life, her own essential being and nature” (p. 232).

Anodos enjoys not being. The following (and penultimate) chapter begins: “I was dead, and right content” (p. 230). There follows an at times sentimental, at times didactic, and at times bizarre evocation of “a state of ideal bliss” with echoes of Plato, Novalis, Goethe, and William Blake, and the suggestion of an identification of Anodos with Christ himself (p. 234). From this “state of ideal bliss” Anodos is wrenched: “a pang and a terrible shudder went through me; a writhing as of death convulsed me; and I became once again conscious of a more limited, even a bodily and earthly life” (p. 233). Paradoxically, it is a death agony which brings Anodos back to this life, a life which “seemed to correspond to what we think death is, before we die” (p. 234). There is also a strong suggestion of *jouissance*, a violent “coming” into contact with “the real.” In a literal sense, Anodos has come home, back to quotidian reality.

Yet what “the real” is, is precisely the issue which remains undecided at the end of *Phantastes*. On one level there is the

theme, typical of German Romanticism, of a banal common life which needs somehow to be synthesized with the free play of fantasy. But MacDonald at the end of his novel backs off from the radically Utopian vision whose traces haunt the margins of the Novalis quotations which preface *Phantastes*. The promised “great good coming” (p. 237) to Anodos is not the radical poeticization of reality projected by Novalis’s “magic idealism.” Despite its semiotic trappings, the promise seems to amount to little more than the platitudinous: “what we call evil, is the only and best shape, which, for the person and his condition at the time, could be assumed by the best good” (p. 237). And if MacDonald fails to follow through the dialectic of Novalis, it might equally be said that he fails to follow through Kristeva’s dialectic of the semiotic and the symbolic. The consequent precariousness of the subject-position achieved at the end of *Phantastes* is confirmed by MacDonald’s later fantasy work *Lilith*, where things start to fall apart in a spectacular and disturbing way.²⁴ The question remains of course as to whether the projects of personal and social transformation in the writings of Novalis and Kristeva are in reality more than desperate attempts by what Kelly Oliver calls “melancholy theoreticians” to come to terms with profound feelings of personal loss through the practice of writing.²⁵ Perhaps the modest, ambiguous ending of *Phantastes* is not without a certain courage, the “corage” to which George MacDonald aspired when he took as his motto the anagram of his name “Corage: God mend al.” That courage is in the first place “the courage to be,” or to use Kristeva’s terms in *Black Sun*, the resistance to the “*I am that which is not*” (p. 146).²⁶

NOTES

¹Robert Lee Wolff, *The Golden Key: A Study of the Fiction of George MacDonald* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1961); Norman N. Holland, “Literary Interpretation and Three Phases of Psychoanalysis,” *Critl* 3, 2 (Winter 1976): 221–33; reprinted in *Psychoanalysis, Creativity, and Literature*, ed. Alan Roland (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1978), pp. 233–47.

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

³Richard Reis, *George MacDonald* (New York: Twayne Books, 1972); C. N. Manlove, *Modern Fantasy: Five Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1975); William Raeper, *George MacDonald* (Tring: Lion, 1987).

⁴Cusick, p. 58.

⁵David Holbrook, introduction to *Phantastes*, by George MacDonald (London: Everyman Paperback, 1983), pp. vi–xxv.

⁶In a secret drawer in MacDonald's desk were found, after his death, a lock of his mother's hair and a letter by her containing the following reference to his premature weaning: "I cannot help in my heart being very much grieved for him yet, for he has not forgot it . . . he cryed desperate for a while in the first night, but he has cryed very little since and I hope the worst is over now." See Greville MacDonald, *George MacDonald and His Wife* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1924), p. 32.

⁷George MacDonald, *Phantastes: A Faërie Romance* (1858; London: Dent, 1915), p. 4. Subsequent references are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text.

⁸Julia Kristeva, *Tales of Love*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1987), p. 38.

⁹Kristeva, *Tales of Love*, pp. 277–8.

¹⁰Holbrook, p. xix.

¹¹Holbrook, p. xvii.

¹²Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1982), p. 65.

¹³Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1989). Subsequent references are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text. The first quatrain of "El Desdichado" runs as follows:

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

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

(p. 140)

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

¹⁴Cf. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust, Part One*, trans. David Luke (Oxford and New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1981), lines 1349–50. Quoted in MacDonald, p. 67.

¹⁵Cf. Stephen Prickett, "Fictions and Metafictions: *Phantastes*, *Wilhelm Meister*, and the idea of the 'Bildungsroman,'" in *The Gold Thread*, pp. 109–25; Roderick McGillis, introduction to *The Princess and the Goblin*, and *The Princess and Curdie*, by George MacDonald (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1990), pp. vii–xxviii, xvi. On MacDonald's resistance to binary thinking see also Roderick McGillis, "Phantastes and *Lilith*: Femininity and Freedom," in *The Gold Thread*, pp. 31–55.

¹⁶Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 131.

¹⁷E.g., "A Märchen is like a dream image without coherence . . . In a genuine Märchen everything must be miraculous, mysterious and incoherent . . . here begins the time of anarchy, of lawlessness, freedom . . . the world of the Märchen is a total opposition to the world of truth and for that very reason has the total likeness to it that chaos has to the completed creation." In MacDonald's text the epigraph is untranslated; the translation here is mine. On the history of omissions and misprints relating to these Novalis extracts see Wolff, pp. 42–5.

¹⁸Prickett, p. 117.

¹⁹David S. Robb, *George MacDonald* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1987), pp. 80–3.

²⁰Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, pp. 48–9.

²¹Cf. Novalis's concept of *Selbsttödtung* (which Thomas Carlyle translates as "annihilation of self"), and which MacDonald would have known from Carlyle's essay on Novalis if not from Novalis himself. See Thomas Carlyle, "Novalis," in *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays*, vol. 2 (London: Chapman and Hall, 1899), pp. 1–55.

²²Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 48.

²³For Kristeva on sacrifice, see John Lechte, *Julia Kristeva* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), pp. 73–5, 148–9; also Kelly Oliver, *Reading Kristeva: Unraveling the Double-bind* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1993), pp. 40–1.

²⁴George MacDonald, *Lilith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981). See my chapter "The Angel in the House of Death: A Psychoanalytical and Theological Reading of George MacDonald's *Lilith*," in the forthcoming "*The Angel in the House*": *Victorian Images of the Religious Women*.

²⁵Kelly Oliver, p. 143.

²⁶The author wishes to thank Vivienne Frost for processing the manuscript of this article.