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The literary imagination as inspiration

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Alison Jack

The very outside of a book had a charm to me. It was a kind of sacrament- an outward sign of an inward spiritual grace; as, indeed, what on God's earth is not?¹

Duncan Campbell, the hero of George MacDonald's novel *The Portent* (1864), finds solace and companionship among the books of his host's library, and feels compelled to bring order out of the chaos he encounters there by compiling a catalogue. He also finds much to deceive ('love poems without any love in them') and puzzling omissions (the 'perfect set of our poets-perfect' omits Chaucer and George Herbert). However, in the 'many romances of a very marvellous sort', as well as in the 'German classics', he finds both distraction and a source of 'wealth inexhaustible'.² This library is the setting for an experience of a moment of supernatural insight: seated on a pile of books in the guise of 'the genius of the place', Campbell 'sees' the shifting and then vanishing face of the mysterious Lady Alice. The library functions almost as a cathedral, built with human hands yet full of divine promise and presence, rewarding its devotees with meaningful interaction on multiple levels. The suggestion that the reading of fiction might have this function and potential, detached from organised religion, informs much of the work of Scottish writers as diverse as Catherine Sinclair, Edward Irving and George MacDonald, who each had wide popular appeal.

The major event in Scottish ecclesiastical life during the period 1832- 1870 was, of course, the Disruption of 1843 which led to the founding of the Free Church of Scotland. Angus Calder has suggested that the Disruption proved to be 'too reasonable, too worldly' to provoke much fiction.³

¹ George MacDonald, *The Portent: A Story of the Inner Vision of the Highlanders, Commonly Called the Second Sight* (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1864), p. 82, quoted in Kerry Dearborn, *The Baptised Imagination: The Theology of George MacDonald* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), pp. 44-45.

² MacDonald, *The Portent*, pp. 82-83.

³ Angus Calder, 'The Disruption in Fiction', in Stewart J. Brown and Michael Fry (eds) *Scotland in the Age of the Disruption* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1993), pp. 113-134, p. 114.

Compared to the physical bravery of the Cameronians and the poignant history of the Jacobites, in the theatre of Scottish history the Disruption generated sparse literary interest. Calder notes only Lydia Miller's *Passages in the Life of an English Heiress or Recollections of Disruption Times in Scotland*, which offered a perspective on the Disruption from the Edinburgh of 1847 and ran to only one edition; and William Alexander's *Johnny Gibb of Gushetneuk*, published serially in the *Aberdeen Free Press* from 1869-1870 and then appearing in many editions, focusing more on the influence of the Disruption on rural communities. The former was directed at an English audience, to promote the Free Church cause and emphasise its generosity and attractiveness over the temptations of other denominations, chiefly Roman Catholicism. Restrained in its expression by an evangelical anxiety about the appropriateness of fiction, nevertheless Miller's work subscribed to the view that fiction might have didactic power to be harnessed for spiritual good. Alexander's novel came from a slightly later period and is less polemical, content to outline the social criticism implicit in the Disruption while not attributing its cause or effect to the Disruption itself.

The Disruption may not have directly generated widespread or popular literary outputs but the writing of those who courted theological change often took literary form. Stewart J. Brown has noted the role that the writing of Thomas Chalmers, the leader of the Disruption, played in the literary imagination of those who followed him.⁴ Chalmers's sermon series, *The Discourses on the Christian Revelation, Viewed in Connection with Modern Astronomy*, published in 1817, had sold nearly 20,000 copies in the first year of its publication. Chalmers's prose tackled the grand themes of science and religion with poetic extravagance and intellectual imagination, bringing Newtonian astronomy into engagement with the revelation of God for the whole universe. Critics might attack Chalmers for his divergence from the message of scripture and his apparent shifting from the traditional understanding of the death of Christ, but his volume 'ran like wild-fire through the

⁴ Stewart J. Brown, *Thomas Chalmers and the Godly Commonwealth in Scotland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982.)

country'.⁵ As Brown argues, the boldness and energy of Chalmers's writing appealed to readers with a strictly Evangelical view of the dangers of secular literature: it might be read as 'romantic epic, an opportunity for escape'.⁶ Literature in its widest sense contributed to the energy which led to the Disruption, although the growth and development of the Free Church might not have generated a literature of its own. However, in the mid-nineteenth century, popular religion and literature forged a new relationship in the work of writers such as Edward Irving, Catherine Sinclair, and George MacDonald.

Edward Irving (1792-1834) and George MacDonald (1824-1905) were a generation apart but shared a vocation to ordained ministry, allied to a belief in the power of the divine to work through the literary imagination. They both gained popular appeal but were exiled physically and theologically from the orthodoxy of the established denominations of the Scottish Church (the Church of Scotland in the case of Irving, and the Congregational Church in the case of MacDonald). By some, at least, Irving and MacDonald were both granted the status of writers of scripture: prophetic voices who mediated the Word of God to their readers and hearers.

Irving's extravagant use of language in his preaching, writing and theological discourse emphasised the role of the Holy Spirit, leading him to explore new ways to interpret divine-human relationships and to read the prophecies of Daniel and the Book of Revelation. The attractive novelty of his prayer for a bereaved family to be 'cast upon the fatherhood of God' brought him the patronage of powerful figures such as George Canning. His later translating and introducing of Lacunza's millenarian *The Coming of Messiah in Glory and Majesty*, with its emphasis on the outpouring of the Spirit as evidence of the apocalyptic end-times, was less popular with the ruling classes.

Nevertheless, his early morning lectures on the Apocalypse to the people of Edinburgh during the

⁵ William Hazlitt, *The Spirit of the Age* (London: Henry Colburn, 1825), p. 97, quoted in Brown, *Thomas Chalmers and the Godly Commonwealth in Scotland*, p. 108.

⁶ Brown, *Thomas Chalmers and the Godly Commonwealth in Scotland*, p. 109.

General Assembly of the Church of Scotland in 1828 brought him more popular acclaim.⁷ Irving was not a lone voice in proclaiming that the Pentecostal gifts of healing and speaking in tongues were now available to all: the Scottish ministers John McLeod Campbell and A. J. Scott were also prominent in this early movement, and were deposed by the Church of Scotland for their views. However, Irving's powers of rhetoric and polemical energy in his preaching and writing brought him a high profile within Scotland and beyond.⁸ Although his status within what became the Catholic Apostolic Church⁹ was understood as prophetic rather than as one of leadership, interest in his life and work on the part of Thomas Carlyle and Mrs Oliphant meant that he remained a figure of some literary and intellectual stature through the mid-Victorian period.

George MacDonald's long life and extensive literary output gave him an even stronger claim of influence over the popular religious imagination of the period. For the eponymous hero of MacDonald's novel *Robert Falconer*, church was 'weariness to every inch of flesh upon his bones'.¹⁰ In contrast, MacDonald's aim was to release and redeem the imagination of his readers to reveal the love and purpose of God, in the belief that 'God is the God of the beautiful, Religion is the love of the beautiful, and Heaven the home of the beautiful'.¹¹ As Dearborn has argued, 'The imagination became his ally in communicating theological ideas that had been rejected when preached directly. Novels and stories became his pulpit through which he could fulfil his call to preach the good news of Jesus Christ'.¹² By symbolic suggestion, in a variety of genres including children's fiction,

⁷ In her *The Life of Edward Irving* (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1864), Mrs Oliphant notes that even Thomas Chalmers was unable to gain entrance to the church where the lectures were held, and that he had written at the time, 'Irving is drawing prodigious crowds. We attempted this morning to force our way into St Andrew's Church: but it was all in vain' (p. 229), quoted in Arnold Dallimore, *Forerunner of the Charismatic Movement: The Life of Edward Irving* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1983), p. 102.

⁸ William Hazlett, in his *The Spirit of the Age* (London: Henry Colburn, 1825) comments that Irving 'merely makes use of the stronghold of religion as a resting place from which he sallies forth, armed with modern topics, and with penal fire, like Achilles of old rushing from the Grecian tents, against the adversaries of God and man' (p. 91).

⁹ 'Catholic' used here to denote the 'universal' nature of the denomination.

¹⁰ George MacDonald, *Robert Falconer* (Boston: Loring, 1868, p. 304).

¹¹ George MacDonald, Letter to his Father, in Greville MacDonald, *George MacDonald and His Wife* (New York: Dial, 1924) p. 108, quoted in Hein, *The Harmony Within*, p. 10.

¹² Dearborn, *Baptized Imagination*, p. 19.

MacDonald sought to reveal the eternal and divine reality he understood to be both reaching out for a response from humanity, and the object of the yearning of the inner self of the individual. While this is perhaps most fully worked out in his fantasy fiction, even in his realistic novels such as *Thomas Wingfold*, there is woven a sacramental understanding of the reciprocal presence of God. There the curate Wingfold consoles the heartbroken Leopold with the assurance that 'the same God who is in us, and upon whose tree we are the buds, if not yet the flowers, also is all about us- inside the Spirit; outside, the Word. And the two are ever trying to meet in us.'¹³

As Duncan Campbell had discovered in the library in *The Portent*, the role of literature to enable the journey towards salvation, from 'bud' to 'flower', through the abandoning of the old self, is suggested clearly in MacDonald's earlier novel *Phantastes*.¹⁴ On the surface, the novel is a random and confusing sequence of journeys and experiences, as perplexing to the hero, Anodos, as it is to the reader. The outward incoherence is contrasted with the coherence and harmony which underlies the fantasy, mirroring the world of the imagination created by the literary art and guaranteed by God. After times of trial leading to new self-understanding about finding the self through serving the other, Anodos realises 'self will come to life even in the slaying of self; but there is ever something deeper and stronger than it, which will emerge at last from the unknown abysses of the soul'.¹⁵ MacDonald's universal vision, which challenged the Calvinist Federalism of his church, found expression in the symbolic escapism of his fiction, and proved remarkably popular, whether or not its heterodoxy was noticed by all of his readers. And for him, as the prophet obediently fulfilling his calling to write as led by his imagination and informed by the Spirit, the reception was out of his hands. While his theology might provoke censure from church authorities, many critics found his 'allegorical and visionary style' to be both 'heart-reaching' in its 'setting aside the phraseology of conventional divinity', and reassuringly familiar with 'no unaccustomed words or rhymes sounding

¹³ George MacDonald, *Thomas Wingfold* Vol 3 (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1876), p. 135.

¹⁴ George MacDonald, *Phantastes: A Faerie Romance for Men and Women* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1858).

¹⁵ MacDonald, *Phantastes*, p. 212.

strangely ...[to the] untutored ear'.¹⁶ Chalmers's theological writing might have functioned as fiction for the theologically particular; but here MacDonald offers fiction with a theological function and application for those whose connection with organised religion might be less secure. For both, an appeal to the imagination offers spiritual as well as aesthetic benefits.

Imagination is a more troubled and troubling force in the work of Catherine Sinclair who, like Irving and MacDonald, appealed to the religious convictions of her readers through her literary output. In 1839, her novel *Holiday House: A Book for the Young* was published to popular acclaim. The first half of the novel offers a series of tales about two adventurous and naughty children, Laura and Harry; the second is a more serious description of the extended deathbed scenes of their older brother Frank. Some later critics have read the novel as 'an exceedingly moral tale indeed',¹⁷ despite Sinclair's claim to 'paint that species of noisy, frolicsome, mischievous children which is now almost extinct [from a time when] there was still some individuality of character and feeling allowed to remain'.¹⁸ Frank's approach to death on this view offers a thoroughly orthodox learning opportunity for his siblings, who must learn to find happiness in the eternal hope of heaven. Others have interpreted the novel as a critique of the deadening influence of technological time on the education of the young, who should, for Sinclair, exist for as long as possible in the utopic timelessness of childhood.¹⁹ On this view, Frank's extended death is parodic, a critique of his life which has been ruled by the expectations of modernity and the demands of timekeeping from a young age, driven by the imperialistic expansion which has led to his critical wounding in a battle with slave-ships in Africa. What we might note here is that Sinclair in her introduction asserts both that reading might be a 'relaxation from study', rather than 'a study in itself'; and that she hopes her volume 'might

¹⁶ Anonymous Review of George MacDonald's *Poems* (London: Longman, Brown, Green, Longmans, and Roberts, 1857) in *The Scotsman* 12 August 1857.

¹⁷ Robert Wolff, 'Introduction to *Holiday House*', in Robert Lee Wolff (ed.) *1837-1900, The Victorian Age* (New York: Stonehill, 1985) pp. 3-6, 4, quoted in A. Robin Hoffman, '*Holiday House*, childhood, and the end(s) of time', *Children's Literature: Annual of the Modern Language Association Division on Children's Literature and the Children's Literature Association* (41) 203, pp. 115-139, 309-310, p. 130.

¹⁸ Catherine Sinclair, Preface to *Holiday House: A Book for the Young* (Edinburgh: William Whyte and Co., 1839), pp. iv-v.

¹⁹ See Hoffman, '*Holiday House*, childhood, and the end(s) of time'.

inculcate a pleasing and permanent consciousness, that religion is the best resource in happier hours, and the only refuge in the hour of affliction'.²⁰ Just as her novel's binary structure seems to undermine the message of each half, so her introduction offers contradictory perspectives on the role of fiction in the formation of her readers.

This tension has been noted in her adult fiction also. In her first novel, *Modern Accomplishments*,²¹ the role of reading on the education of the young is discussed by the various female characters in the setting of home. '[B]ooks of practical piety and evangelical truth' are compared favourably with 'those abounding in speculation of wild enthusiasm and daring presumptions',²² although there is no dogmatic conclusion reached. In her second novel, *Modern Society*,²³ the parish minister asserts that he wishes Thomas Chalmers's 'work on Civic Economy could be rained down in thousands on the world, to show what true philanthropy means'.²⁴ Chalmers's writing is presented as both entertaining and a universally available indicator of 'sound morals and ...a guide to society at large'.²⁵ However, in Sinclair's later novel *Beatrice*,²⁶ the relationship between literature, imagination and right belief is more troubled. Here, imagination is associated with the dangerous dissembling which is the preserve of the 'Italian school of superstition'.²⁷ No better actors exist than among the Jesuits, 'being willing and able to assume any part', asserts the Protestant Lady Edith to the parish minister.²⁸ In this novel, Chalmers appears as a marble bust in front of which a young Catholic girl recites her rosary, oblivious to his literary and spiritual wisdom: his printed words have lost their power. Nevertheless, Sinclair has chosen to use the tools of imaginative literature to make her

²⁰ Sinclair, Preface to *Holiday House*, p. iv, vi.

²¹ Catherine Sinclair, *Modern Accomplishments; or The March of Intellect* (Edinburgh: Waugh and Innes, 1836).

²² Sinclair, *Modern Accomplishments*, p. 315.

²³ Catherine Sinclair, *Modern Society: or, The March of Intellect. The Conclusion of Modern Society* (Edinburgh: Waugh and Innes, 1837).

²⁴ Sinclair, *Modern Society*, p. 118.

²⁵ Timothy C. Baker, 'Catherine Sinclair, Domestic Community, and the Catholic Imagination', in *Studies in the Novel* (45) 2 (Summer 2013) pp. 143-160, p. 148.

²⁶ Catherine Sinclair, *Beatrice; Or, The Unknown Relatives* 3 Vols (London: Richard Bentley, 1852).

²⁷ Catherine Sinclair, Expanded Preface to *Beatrice*, published under the title *Modern Superstition* (London: Simpkin, Marshall, 1857), p. 3, quoted in Baker, 'Catherine Sinclair, Domestic Community and the Catholic Imagination', p. 157.

²⁸ Sinclair, *Beatrice*, p. 292.

increasingly anti-Catholic point, and her heroes are themselves revealed to be masters of disguise as they seek to escape from the clutches of the Jesuits and their false teaching. In Sinclair's later work, as Baker notes,²⁹ the contradictory connection between her fiction and her perception of religious responsibility which was both popular and orthodox, is stretched to breaking point.

Edward Irving, George MacDonald and Catherine Sinclair offer very different perspectives on the relationship between literature and popular religion in the Scottish context. Irving and MacDonald pursued their ministries and literary endeavours in an uneasy exile from both their homeland and their denominations, both pushed and pulled away from their roots into a much wider readership and larger religious milieu. In the years between 1832- 1870, while Irving's literary legacy and theological influence gradually waned, MacDonald's grew as Sinclair's shifted and uneasily reflected some of the theological and social debates within the Church in Scotland. MacDonald's image of the sacramental power of the book with which this chapter began, with the library as a place where God and the reader as worshipper might meet, is a powerful expression of an idea with popular appeal. It implies a connection between the writer and the divine which is prophetic and outwith ecclesiastical structures and theologies. MacDonald in particular was at ease with the stark contrast between what he called in *David Elginbrod* the 'ugliest forms' of Reformed worship³⁰ and his definition of poetry as 'truth in beauty'.³¹ In their own ways, MacDonald, Irving and Sinclair offer theological perspectives for the popular imagination to engage with, unfettered from Church control. In their literature, as MacDonald's hero Anodos discovers, there is:

Many a wring, and its curing song;

Many a road, and many an inn;

Room to roam, but only one home

²⁹ Baker, 'Catherine Sinclair, Domestic Community and the Catholic Imagination', p. 158.

³⁰ George MacDonald, *David Elginbrod* (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1863) p. 36

³¹ George MacDonald, *A Dish of Orts: Chiefly Papers on the Imagination, and Shakespeare*, enl. ed. (London: Sampson, Low, Marston, 1893) p. 15.

For all the world to win.³²

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