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GEORGE MACDONALD'S *A BOOK OF STRIFE* AND THE TRADITION OF METAPHYSICAL POETRY¹

Introduction

The Diary of an Old Soul, written, probably, during George MacDonald's fifty-fifth year, privately printed and issued early in 1880, . . . I can barely describe, and not at all discuss. . . The whole is the record of a life's rather than a year's religious thought. So personal, so single-minded, so intense, at once so exalted and profound is this remarkable poem, that criticism of it is only for friends with a common appreciation.²

Anybody who has tried to talk about *A Book of Strife in the Form of a Diary of an Old Soul* will share the sentiments of Ronald MacDonald's comment on his father's difficult and rewarding book. If I still venture to describe and discuss it, it is because I hope to qualify as one of the "friends with a common appreciation." Since, however,

¹ For their usual hospitality and practical helpfulness in my preparing this talk, I want thank the staff of the Wade Center at Wheaton College. I have also greatly benefitted from Rolland Hein's response to my reading of *A Book of Strife*.

² Ronald MacDonald, *From a Northern Window: A Personal Reminiscence of George MacDonald by His Son*, Masterline Series 1 (1919; Eureka, CA: Sunrise Books, 1989) 76. The same note is struck by Ronald's brother Greville MacDonald: "He gave his most sacred musings and converse with God to us, his followers; but he would not submit them to common-minded reviewers" (Greville MacDonald, *George MacDonald and His Wife* [London: George Allen & Unwin, 1924]).

friends sometimes lack the distance necessary for a sound critical judgment, I would first like to put myself deliberately at a distance from *A Book of Strife* by looking at it in relation to the English tradition of Metaphysical Poetry.

It may seem somewhat adventurous to compare a volume of poetry by a Victorian Scottish author with, or maybe even to, poetry of the seventeenth century. But is it really? Metaphysical Poetry, as written by John Donne, George Herbert, and Andrew Marvell, is “distinguished by ingenuity, intellectuality, and, sometimes, obscurity,” according to the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, and the term applies, by extension, to “any poetry which displays similar qualities.”³ Set either in an amorous or a religious context, its dominant features are “[r]ealism, introspection, and irony.”⁴ Coined first by Dryden, and then more prominently by Dr. Johnson, the term “metaphysical poets” for a long time had a pejorative ring to it – among other things because these poets used conceits, images in which “the most heterogeneous ideas are yoked together.”⁵ According to C. S. Lewis, it is this *discors concordia*, “far more than its learning that gives metaphysical poetry its essential flavor.”⁶ Various waves of admiration and rejection during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries followed each other, until T. S. Eliot came to the rescue of the metaphysical poets by turning the historical term into a generic one.

For him, the metaphysical conceit as employed by Donne is “the elaboration . . . of a figure of speech to the farthest stage to which ingenuity can carry it.”⁷ And such an intellectual activity is very similar to what the modern poet of the twentieth century has to do in a fragmented and multi-layered world. Through “amalgamating dispa-

³ Frank J. Warnke, “Metaphysical Poetry,” *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, ed. Alex Preminger, Frank J. Warnke, and O. B. Hardison, Jr. (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1974) 495-96; 495.

⁴ Warnke 495.

⁵ Quoted by T. S. Eliot, “The Metaphysical Poets,” *Selected Essays*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace & World, 1950) 241-50; 243

⁶ C. S. Lewis, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century, Excluding Drama* (1954; Oxford: Oxford UP, 1973) 540.

⁷ Eliot, “The Metaphysical Poets” 242.

rate experience” he is able to reflect the “great variety and complexity” of life, a reflection which for him “must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning.”⁸ Thus, metaphysical poetry is not just a unique mode of writing at a certain point in English literary history, but a way of “fusing sense with thought” which has turned up at various stages of history.⁹ Perhaps not incidentally, the last of the three periods which Eliot later named as particularly prone to producing metaphysical poetry – the Italian *trecento*, the seventeenth century in England, and the period between 1870 and 1890 in France¹⁰ – is the period in which MacDonald wrote his *Book of Strife*.

Partly, metaphysical poetry, e.g., Donne’s “The Sunne Rising,” is known to express the new scientific and philosophical thought in the seventeenth century: both the change in world-view from a geo-centric to a helio-centric one and the newly developing sense of the value of the individual of the seventeenth century. What to Donne meant incorporating a newly emerged world-view into his daily experience, his religious thinking and also his poetic images, to later poets meant joining equally new intellectual and scientific developments to sensual experience.

At least several of the features mentioned above can be found in the poetry of *A Book of Strife*. The religious context is clear enough, and its “ingenuity, intellectuality and, sometimes, obscurity” have been commented on by a number of critics. Though there is not much realism in it, and the irony which it sometimes displays is gentle and subtle, one of its prominent features is introspection. And when it comes to fusing new philosophies with sensory experience, there is enough

⁸ Eliot, “The Metaphysical Poets” 247 f.

⁹ For a comprehensive account of what characterizes this mode see Earl Miner, *The Metaphysical Mode from Donne to Cowley* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1969).

¹⁰ T. S. Eliot, “The Clark Lectures,” *The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1994) 39-228; 58 f.

new thinking of the nineteenth century in these poems – as we shall see shortly.

But all of these similarities might be called accidental if there were not MacDonald's own interest in the metaphysical poets, as he expresses it in his book *England's Antiphon* (1868).

England's Antiphon

In 1868, MacDonald published a volume of poetry criticism that was praised by a contemporary reader as "the most satisfactory treatment of English sacred verse."¹¹ This book deals with religious poetry in the English language from the thirteenth century on and extensively covers the poems of the "metaphysical poets." The poet's chief aim was "the mediating towards an intelligent and cordial sympathy betwixt my readers and the writers from whom I have quoted."¹² In theological terms he understood his including of poets from many different religious camps as an ecumenical enterprise, as a David-like throwing of "this my small pebble at the the head of the great Sabbath-breaker *Schism*." (*EA* vi). In poetical respect, more than 50 years before Eliot, MacDonald discusses many of the main techniques which Eliot would highlight in his lectures – though within a rather different framework of poetic values.

I would like to point out some of the book's observations about John Donne and George Herbert. MacDonald's main complaint about Donne is the latter's incoherence, as when he says: ". . . he [Donne] says nothing unrelated to the main idea of the poem; but not the less certainly does the whole resemble the speech of a child of active imagination . . ." (*EA* 115). Later he compares Donne to a hunter to whom "all is worthy game" (*EA* 115): ". . . in his play with ideas, Dr. John Donne, so far from serving the end, sometimes obscures it al-

¹¹ W. Garrett Horder, "George MacDonald: A Nineteenth-Century Seer," *The American Monthly Review of Reviews* 32 (Dec. 1905): 686-88.

¹² George MacDonald, *England's Antiphon* (London: Macmillan, 1868) vi. From now on referred to as *EA*.

most hopelessly: the hart escapes while he follows the squirrels and weasels and bats" (*EA* 115).

Equally devastating is his criticism of the rhythmic and musical qualities of Donne's verse, which he calls "harsh and unmusical beyond the worst that one would imagine fit to be called verse" (*EA* 115). Because of Donne's indifference to these matters, MacDonald bestows on him "the distinction of having no rival in ruggedness of metric movement and associated sounds" (*EA* 115).

In comparing Donne, whom he judges to present "fine thought grotesquely attired" (123), with Herbert, MacDonald clearly prefers the latter, calling him "a poet indeed." For him, Herbert is a prime example of the consistency of thought and music in poetry. It is a kind of thought that, in MacDonald's view, is "bent upon discovering God everywhere" (*EA* 179). Because this thought is wedded to – or clothed in – an "exquisite feeling of lyrical art" (*EA* 181), his admiration for Herbert is sometimes uttered in almost hymnic tones: "Amongst the keener delights of the life which is at the door, I look for the face of George Herbert, with whom to talk humbly would be in bliss a higher bliss" (*EA* 193). Of course, with strong criticism and high praise like that, one is tempted to compare MacDonald's own achievement with that of Donne and Herbert. What are *his* images like and how perfect is *his* rhythm in *A Book of Strife*?

A brief look at the imagery MacDonald uses yields quite a bit of similarity. While he seldom employs what Helen Gardner has called the "extended conceit," he quite frequently uses the "brief conceit," which is "like a spark made by striking two stones together. After the flash the stones are just two stones."¹³ A coining like "brain-frost" is such a brief conceit, but it is then also imbedded in a more extended, if also more conventional metaphor – that of the moods as changes of weather:

Do thou, my God, my spirit's weather control;
And as I do not gloom though the day be dun,
Let me not gloom when earth-born vapors roll

¹³ Helen Gardner, "Introduction," *The Metaphysical Poets*, ed. Helen Gardner, rev. ed. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966) 15-29; 19.

Across the infinite zenith of my soul.
 Should sudden brain-frost through the heart's summer run,
 Cold, weary, joyless, waste of air and sun,
 Thou art my south, my summer-wind, my all, my one.

(22 January)

A great number of his images are from the realms of family life, animals and plants, climate and weather, traveling, esp. sea-voyaging, and many have come to him through their first being used in the Bible. They may be not as striking to us as some of the more daring ones used by Donne, yet their earthiness seems almost as far removed from the eternal truths they represent. In Herbert, MacDonald had admired the "use of homeliest imagery for highest thought" (*EA* 180), and homely imagery is exactly what *A Book of Strife* is full of.

And how does his rhythm compare with the Metaphysicals? Though we may disagree with W. H. Auden who said that "George MacDonald was not endowed with that particular gift which the writing of verse requires,"¹⁴ we have to concede that the poet was indeed somewhat careless in the rhythmic composition of some verses and somewhat contriving in making his syntax fit the rhyme pattern. When he says,

Law is thy Father's; thou hast it obeyed,
 And it thereby subject to thee hast made . . . (21 September),

the effect is certainly a lack of the smoothness and melodiousness which he admired in George Herbert. Much of what sounds enigmatic or obscure in these poems may be difficult to understand because of a warbled syntax: word orders as found in the poem for 13 March must be completely rearranged in order to make the sentence intelligible: "Than mine, oh, many an ignorant heart loves more!"

Sometimes unaccented syllables are slipped into the otherwise regular flow of the verses: the usual ten-syllable line may suddenly turn into a twelve-syllable line: "He cannot pass me, on other business

¹⁴ W. H. Auden, "George MacDonald," *Forewords and Afterwords* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974) 268-73; 269.

bound . . .” (28 September). And in terms of rhyme patterns, we will have a hard time finding much consistency there. Of course, we may also look at the variety of forms the way that the poet’s son Ronald looked at it when he called it “a wealth of variation in the arrangement of the rhymes, which is extraordinarily effective in averting monotony.”¹⁵

Measured against his own demands on the formal quality of Donne’s poems, MacDonald’s poetry does not come off too well. He himself must have felt that; when he was told by a friend, “[t]here are lovely ideas in your hymns, but they lack clearness,” he replied: “Yes you are right. I never had time to polish them.”¹⁶

Form

But does MacDonald perhaps redeem some of these weaknesses by a tight structure of his work? What manner of poem is *A Book of Strife* anyway? Or is it not one but many poems? The critics have called it “a devotional poem divided into twelve sections for the twelve months of the year, with a stanza to be read every day,”¹⁷ “a calendar poem with a separate verse for each day of the year,”¹⁸ or they have wavered between finding in it “366 rhymed seven-lined poems”¹⁹ and “a single poem of ‘chained’ verses rather than . . . a group of individual poems.”²⁰ The truth lies somewhere in between. It is true that there is a biographical and theological coherence of the individual poems, and it is equally true that each of them can be read by itself and makes sense

¹⁵ Ronald MacDonald, *From a Northern Window* 76.

¹⁶ Horder 688.

¹⁷ William Raeper, *George MacDonald* (Tring: Lion, 1987) 124; similarly Rolland Hein, *The Harmony Within: The Spiritual Vision of George MacDonald* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982) 24.

¹⁸ Hein, *Victorian Mythmaker* 314.

¹⁹ Glen Edward Sadler, “Cosmic Vision: A Study of the Poetry of George MacDonald,” Diss. Aberdeen University, 1966, 303.

²⁰ Sadler, “Cosmic Vision” 329.

as a separate entity. What is more interesting in my opinion is the coherence of smaller entities, of little thematically related groups of poems within the large cycle.

An early commentator inaccurately called the seven-line poems "sonnets," which prompted MacDonald's correction: "Besides the description is false: there is not one sonnet in the book."²¹ Sometimes two poems are connected by a common theme or image (as 21 and 22 March on human death and Jesus' crucifixion), sometimes it is three (as in the poems about the Prodigal Son [11-13 Nov.]), and there are also sequences of six poems (12-17 September, about the Soul's being hunted by God²²).

Their images and themes partly correspond to the season in which they are placed. Thus, for instance, the poems talk about "brain frost" on 22 January, of "slanting rain" on 3 May, and, on 25 December, celebrate Christmas as the "blue sapphire" of all the other days. Though mostly the groups begin and end with the individual months, they sometimes overstep these boundaries (e.g., that between May and June), so that, generally, the placing of themes and the opening and closing of thematic groups does not follow an identifiable plan. Even biography does not give us clues as to the structure.

Biographical Significance

Because of its highly personal tone, biographers of MacDonald, like William Raeper, have judged the book's significance to be largely if not mainly biographical: "It ruminates on friends and relatives long and recently dead and concentrates on how God has dealt with the author through all his sufferings."²³ I hope to show that there is much more to it.

²¹ Cf. Greville MacDonald 497. Helen Needham, "Essentially Joyous," *Moody Monthly* 66 (Sept. 1965): 50-51; 50 still calls them "sonnet-like."

²² This sequence is strongly reminiscent of Francis Thompson's poem "Hound of Heaven."

²³ Raeper, *George MacDonald* 124. See also 158 and 344.

Considering the period of MacDonald's life during which *A Book of Strife* was written, with the incisive losses MacDonald and his wife suffered as parents, it is no wonder that he chose the title he did. This was a period of struggle indeed. On 28 April 1878, their twenty-four-year-old daughter Mary died of the consequences of scarlet fever, and she was soon followed by the fifteen-year-old Maurice on 5 March 1879. Five years later, Caroline Grace died on 5 May 1884 and Lilia on 22 Nov. 1891.²⁴

A portrait of Maurice can be found in the poem for 30 December:²⁵

Twilight of the transfiguration-joy,
 Gleam-faced, pure-eyed, strong-willed, high-hearted boy!
 Hardly thy life clear forth of heaven was sent,
 Ere it broke out into a smile and went.
 So swift thy growth, so true thy goalward bent,
 Thou, child and sage inextricably blent,
 Wilt one day teach thy father in some heavenly tent.

This idea of the reversal of parent and child roles also informs the lines for 4 January, which reflect on the deaths of both Mary and Maurice:²⁶

Death, like high faith levelling, lifteth all.
 When I awake, my daughter and my son,
 Grown sister and brother, in my arms shall fall,
 Tenfold my girl and boy.

The poems close with memories of his own father: "Whole-hearted is my worship of the man / From whom my earthly history began." Thus the poet's role as a learning child is a twofold one: upwards and downward. His father was a man which earlier in his life he had de-

²⁴ Greville MacDonald (527) relates the lines for 5 May to the death of Lilia, although the *Diary* was published ten years earlier.

²⁵ Cf. Hein, *Victorian Mythmaker* 314 f.

²⁶ Cf. Glenn Edward Sadler, ed., *An Expression of Character: The Letters of George MacDonald* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994) 266.

scribed thus: "Oh that fine old man, my father! He *is* the man to tell anything to. So open and wise and humble and kind – God bless him!"²⁷ And now the son is looking forward to learning from his own son and daughter.

But beyond the more obvious echos, many more covered allusions to his own life, to reminiscences of family and friends and experiences have been pointed out by the biographers. Memories of diseases such as MacDonald's lung haemorrhage in 1855 are echoed in the entry for 28 January,²⁸ of health, financial and spiritual straits in early 1856²⁹ and – as Greville MacDonald will have it – even to such prosaic experiences as the receiving of a cheque on 29 October 1877.³⁰ Taken together, these allusions show that the *Diary* is not just a record of the immediate events surrounding its composition but, as Ronald MacDonald said, actually much more a sum, experiential and theological, of his entire life.

Themes

Though the poems deal with a wealth of different themes,³¹ some themes are especially prominent and interesting, among which are the ideas of the "veiled or impaired vision," of "beneficial suffering," and of the "continuity of creation."

The theme I want to name the "veiled vision," the tension between appearance and reality, between the falseness and truth of perceptions,

²⁷ Letter to his wife, 8 July 1855, Greville MacDonald 234.

²⁸ Greville MacDonald (253) comments: "For many days he lay at death's door, the doctors unable to stanch the incessant flow of blood. . . . Dr. Harrison declared that never had he known any patient who, fully aware that he might be dying, looked death in the face with such perfect equanimity. It was then, surely that these thoughts came to him: [Jan 28th].

²⁹ Greville 260.

³⁰ Echoed in the lines for 9 January (cf. Greville MacDonald 479).

³¹ Glen Sadler sees three central themes in *A Book of Strife*: first of all, the "good death," then the "tension between the two selves," and also the "significance of the Divine family" (339, 341).

but also between an immanent blindness and a transcendental vision, can be found, for example, in the stanza for 23 October:

Things cannot look all right so long as I
 Am not all right who see – therefore not right
 Can see. The lamp within sends out the light
 Which shows the things; and if its rays go wry,
 Or are not white, they must part show a lie.
 The man, half-cured, did men not trees conclude,
 Because he moving saw what else had seemed a wood.

The line of reasoning in this poem can only be grasped if we recognize the biblical allusions.³² In Matt. 11:22 f., Jesus says: “The light of the body is the eye: if therefore thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be full of light. But if thine eye be evil, thy whole body shall be full of darkness. If therefore the light that is within thee be darkness, how great is that darkness!” Man’s view of the world, then, is dependent on the existence of unadulterated light within him, and he is utterly incapable of producing that light himself. In an intriguing exegetical move, the last two lines bring the focus on the blind man in Mark 8:22-26, whom Jesus heals in two steps. He first sees “men as trees, walking,” and later he sees “every man clearly.” The development of an improved vision first refers to the visible world – but it also has a bearing on the poetic imagination and, by inference, on poetic language.

Though man’s imagination “is, in small, . . . Mirror of God’s creating mirror” (27 August),³³ it produces only “a cloudy something” (6 June) and cannot fully grasp reality, let alone express it:

³² Many other biblical images are used to make the same point. See, for example, the image of the dark mirror of 1 Cor. 13:12 (27 August).

³³ This statement serves as a caveat against a Romantic hubris of poetic creatorship. On that point see C. S. Lewis’s article “Christianity and Literature,” *Christian Reflections* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1967) 1-11.

Ever I seem to fail in utterance.
 Sometimes amid the swift melodious dance
 Of fluttering words – as if it had not been,
 The thought has melted, vanished into night;
 Sometimes I say a thing I did not mean,
 And lo, 'tis better, by thy ordered chance,
 Than what eluded me, floating too feathery light. (10 September)

In moments of metatextual reflection, the poet even suspects that his “versing” (14 May) – just as all other good things in life – is able to lure him away from God. But he is far from discarding it wholesale as dangerous; he considers it his “all,” which he flings at the feet of God (18 May), and turns his lack of verbal power into a prayer: “If thou wouldst have me speak, Lord, give me speech . . .” (11 September).

Ultimately, however, the poet hopes for an escape from the “twilight border land” (29 May) and the “limbo of things seen and heard” (24 September), and for a restoration of the soul’s undisturbed vision of God:

Dost thou mean sometimes that we should forget thee,
 Dropping the veil of things ‘twixt thee and us?
 Ah, not that we should lose thee and regret thee!
 But that, we turning from our windows thus,
 The frost-fixed God should vanish from the pane,
 Sun-melted, and a moment, Father, let thee
 Look like thyself straight into heart and brain. (18 August)

As almost everywhere in this book, the soul realizes its own impotence and finally gives in to God’s omnipotence willingly, though not passively. It is the divine sun itself that has to melt the fixed – and thus false – image of God that resembles the opaque frostwork on a window-pane. The poet’s perception of God is limited partly because his “foolish eyes” greedily look at the things of this world and see “the gift, see not the giving hand” (13 May).

Bent on improving his vision, as the poet is, he is sober enough to realize that there may be some good lurking in what he perceives as evil. “Beneficial suffering,” another central theme in *A Book of Strife*, implies the biblical realization that many human experiences which

we consider losses or damages may ultimately prove beneficial. Often expressed in images of the dangerous elements of nature (whirlwinds, lightning, thunder [2 June]), these experiences are shown to consist in general or individual threats that serve as “checks” to human errors (7 July), uncover “false faith” in human lives (13 September), or move the human heart towards God: “For this, deep waters overwhelm the fruitful lea, / Wars ravage, famine wastes, plague withers, nor / Shall cease till men have chosen the better part” (3 June).³⁴ Thus God’s love, like a “virtuous medicine,” first effects the death of false feelings and unwise thoughts so that Christ “[u]p in the inner world of men arise” (4 June).

The notion of beneficial suffering also looms large in the verses for 16-18 June:

How many helps thou giv’st to those would learn!
 To some sore pain, to others a sinking heart;
 To some a weariness worse than any smart;
 To some a haunting, fearing, blind concern;
 Madness to some; to some the shaking dart
 Of hideous death still following as they turn;
 To some a hunger that will not depart.

Unrest, bitter sorrow, the sting of love misprized, a frozen heart, and even a mocking demon can be used by God to prepare the sinner’s “second birth” (20 June). No wonder then that doubts and sin also may ultimately prove to be means God uses for the sanctification of his people:

But why should it be possible to mistrust –
 Nor possible only, but its opposite hard?
 Why should not man believe because he must –
 By sight’s compulsion? Why should he be scarred
 With conflict? worn with doubting fine and long?

³⁴ See also the verses for 11 July, which describe how, in the parable of the prodigal son, “[t]he rags, the husks, the swine, the hunger-quest, / Drive home the wanderer to the Father’s breast!”

No man is fit for heaven's musician throng
 Who has not tuned an instrument all shook and jarred. (30 August)

This culminates in the biblical paradox that we can only find life through death: "God, give me strength my evil self to kill, / And die into the heaven of thy pure will. / Then shall this body's death be very tolerable" (26 March).

The contention that the negative elements in life and faith can help us to grow in awareness, to overcome selfishness and to acquire attitudes that more and more resemble the Creator's image³⁵ points to MacDonald's evolutionary view of the world and also of faith. God's "continuous creation" is like the building of a house according to a master plan (15-16 July), and it is going on in the poet's life day by day:

Remember, Lord, thou hast not made me good.
 Or if thou didst, it was so long ago
 I have forgotten – and never understood,
 I humbly think. At best it was a crude,
 A rough-hewn goodness, that did need this woe,
 This sin, these harms of all kinds fierce and rude.
 To shape it out, making it live and grow. (1 October)

If this calls to mind the artisan metaphors of the Old Testament prophets which depict God as the artisan – e.g., as the potter³⁶ – and man as the material which is to become a work of art, it also reminds us of Darwin's evolutionary theory – *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* had been published in 1859. MacDonald's direct communication with a personal God, creator of heaven and earth, and Darwin's explanation of the gradual development of animal life may seem odd fellows, but he did not feel that Darwin's thoughts undermined his beliefs. As Rolland Hein says, "[t]he rise of evolu-

³⁵ Further expressions of this concept are found in the poems for 2-4 June, for example.

³⁶ This metaphor from Jeremiah 18 (and elsewhere in the OT) is explicitly referred to in the poems for 2 and 11 October.

tionary theory, which many Evangelicals saw as devastating to their faith, was something MacDonald welcomed. . . . he saw it as lending strong support to his doctrine of individual spiritual development and growth, and it reinforced his optimism for the moral future of mankind.”³⁷ Incidentally, such an adoption of new thinking in one’s own age was something which MacDonald had admired in George Herbert, whose love for God he felt to be similar to his predecessors’: “But the nation had learned to think more, and new difficulties had consequently arisen. These, again, had to be undermined by deeper thought, and the discovery of yet deeper truth had been the reward” (*EA* 178).

It seems quite natural, then, that the poet makes Asaph’s confession in Psalm 73:22³⁸ his own:

“I am a beast before thee, Lord.”
 Great poet-king, I thank thee for the word.
 Leave not thy son, half-made in beastly guise –
 Less than a man, with more than human cries –
 An unshaped thing in which thyself cries out!
 Finish me, Father; now I am but a doubt;
 Oh, make thy moaning thing for joy to reap and shout! (19 March)

This ongoing creation will only be achieved “by faint degrees” and be a “never ending birth” (10 July). Its goal is nothing else but to make the poet “grow a man” (5 August)” and finally, “a little Christ” (19 May).

Conclusion

Our reading of MacDonald’s *Book of Strife* has tried to compare this work to English metaphysical poetry of the seventeenth century – an undertaking that may resemble the intellectual labor involved in the creation and the deciphering of metaphysical conceits. Of these Helen Gardner writes: “. . . a comparison becomes a conceit when we are

³⁷ Hein, *The Harmony Within* 27.

³⁸ “So foolish was I, and ignorant: I was as a beast before thee.”

made to concede likeness while being strongly conscious of unlikeness."³⁹

We have seen that MacDonald's *A Book of Strife* indeed only partly belongs to the tradition of metaphysical poetry. In formal respects, the poet clearly stays behind his predecessors' best efforts, but when it comes to complexity of argument and of syntax, he resembles them. Above all, the profundity of his thought and the originality of his theology as well as his ability to reconcile new philosophical currents to a sincere personal piety make him a close neighbor and a worthy follower of George Herbert.

The book's significance for the modern reader may lie along these lines, but it may also rest in its dialogic qualities. There is not only the near-to-mystic communion of the lyrical I with God but, in spite of all the obscurity, a constant invitation to the reader to respond. When sending his privately printed volume to a circle of friends, he added this dedication:

Sweet friends, receive my offering. You will find
 Against each worded page a white page set: –
 That is the mirror of each friendly mind
 reflecting my mind. In this book we are met.
 Make it, dear hearts, of worth to you indeed: –
 Let your white page be ground, my print be seed,
 There blossom in true words, with spirit dew-falls wet.

Your old soul.⁴⁰

³⁹ Gardner 19.

⁴⁰ Quoted by Sadler 308/309.

Zusammenfassung

GEORGE MACDONALDS *EIN BUCH DES KAMPFES IN FORM EINES TAGEBUCHS EINER ALTEN SEELE* UND DIE TRADITION DER METAPHYSICAL POETRY

George MacDonalds Gedichtband *A Book of Strife in the Form of a Diary of an Old Soul* (1880) läßt sich in mancher Beziehung in die Tradition der „Metaphysical Poetry“ einordnen, die im siebzehnten Jahrhundert in England Vertreter unter anderem in John Donne, George Herbert und Andrew Marvell hatte, nach T. S. Eliot aber mehr eine Gattung als eine einmalige historische Erscheinung darstellt. Thematisch meist mit Liebe oder religiösen Themen befaßt, zeichnet sie sich aus durch Einfallsreichtum, Intellektualität und bisweilen Obskurität. Auffallendstes Merkmal ist die Vorliebe für kühne dichterische Bilder („conceits“), in denen eigentlich ungleiche Dinge und Sachverhalte miteinander verglichen werden, um (häufig neue) philosophische oder religiöse Erkenntnisse in die Lebenswirklichkeit zu übersetzen.

MacDonalds Verwandtschaft zu dieser Tradition wird durch das Vorhandensein einer Reihe dieser Merkmale in *A Book of Strife* nahegelegt, aber auch durch seine literaturkritische Beschäftigung mit Donne, Herbert und anderen Metaphysicals in *England's Antiphon* (1868), seiner Geschichte geistlicher englischer Dichtung. Donne kritisiert er darin vor allem wegen formaler Unzulänglichkeiten, während er Herbert wegen seiner gedanklichen und religiösen Tiefe lobt.

Die *biographische* Bedeutung von *Diary of an Old Soul* besteht hauptsächlich in MacDonalds Reflexion über die Verluste seiner Kinder, aber auch darüber hinaus lassen sich in den einzelnen Gedichten zahlreiche biographische Anspielungen nachweisen.

In *formaler* Hinsicht bildet das Buch eine Sammlung von 366 jedem Tag des Jahres zugeordneten siebenzeiligen Gedichten von wechselndem Reimschema, die weniger ein zusammenhängendes Ganzes als eine Reihe von kleinen Gruppen und größeren Zyklen darstellen. Die Bilder sind nur zum Teil kühn in der Art der Metaphysicals – sie stammen aus den Bereichen von Familie, häuslichem Leben, Handwerk, Wetter, Reise – häufig der Bibel entnommen – und spannen nur gelegentlich schwer nachvollziehbare Bögen zwischen Bild- und Sachhälfte. Unebenheiten in der rhythmischen und syntaktischen Qualität der Gedichte erinnern an die Schwächen, die MacDonald an Donne kritisiert.

Eine Vielfalt von *Themen* ziehen sich durch die Reflexionen des älter werdenden Menschen, der über die Sehnsucht der Seele nach Gott und Gottes Handeln am Menschen nachdenkt. Auffällig unter diesen Themen sind die „eingeschränkte Sehfähigkeit“ des Menschen, das „heilsame Leiden“ und die „andauernde Schöpfung“. Der Mensch kann von sich aus weder die Welt noch Gott ungebrochen wahrnehmen. Dies schlägt sich für den Dichter in einer eingeschränkten Beschreibungsfähigkeit der Wirklichkeit nieder. Gott sendet dem von ihm entfremdeten Menschen negative Erfahrungen, um ihm die Grenzen menschlichen Autonomiestrebens aufzuzeigen und ihn zu sich zurückzurufen. Auch für den bereits Glaubenden sind negative Lebens- und Glaubenserfahrungen letztlich eher Hilfen als Hindernisse auf dem Weg mit Gott, denn durch solche Erfahrungen läßt Gott im Laufe der Zeit den Menschen als eine neue Schöpfung entstehen.

Der Vergleich MacDonalds mit den Metaphysicals weist ihn als nur teilweise in diese Tradition gehörig aus. Während er in formaler Hinsicht hinter den Besten unter ihnen zurückbleibt, ist er ihnen in der Komplexität der Gedankenführung und der Syntax durchaus ähnlich. Vor allem aber seine gedankliche und theologische Tiefe sowie stellenweise seine Fähigkeit, neue philosophische und wissenschaftliche Strömungen in Bildersprache umzusetzen, rückt ihn als christlichen Dichter in die Nähe George Herberts.