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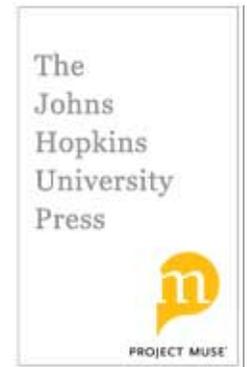
George MacDonald: Divine Carelessness and Fairytale Levity

by Daniel Gabelman (review)

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(Review)

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Daniel Gabelman. **George MacDonald: Divine Carelessness and Fairytale Levity.** Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2013. Pp. x + 261. ISBN 978-1-60258-782-3.

This text, part of the series *The Making of the Christian Imagination*, explores the significance of George MacDonald's "lighthearted modalities": specifically, his fairytales for children. MacDonald, once a congregational minister who was expelled from his first and only pulpit, used his literary work as a substitute venue for promulgating his Christian beliefs; this purpose was, to him, of ultimate significance. So why did he indulge in such a playful and "inconsequential" genre? Gabelman contends that lighthearted literary modes are central to serious theological thought, and that MacDonald understood this well.

In the first part of the book, "Modalities of Levity," Gabelman presents the fundamental concepts that he will, in the second part, apply to MacDonald's fairytales. These concepts are "The Levity of Saints and Angels" (chapter 1); "Ecstasy and Folly" (chapter 2); "Vanity and Play" (chapter 3); and "Carnival and Sabbath" (chapter 4). In this section of the book, the author elaborates his claim that in the premodern world, "levity" connoted a freedom from the weight of the world and of sin which enabled one to rise toward God. Some saints were believed to levitate, and, of course, angels were pictured as winged. Gravity, levity's opposite, connoted attraction to the earth and to earthly (as opposed to heavenly) objects and values. Levity was thus related to the "holy folly" of *kenosis*, the self-emptying that Paul links to Jesus' incarnation. Levity is the ability to take oneself lightly. In elaborating these identifications, Gabelman draws on the writings of Plato and the Neo-Platonics, St. Paul, St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, and Dante, as well as the Gospels.

In an interesting twist on the usual view of Ecclesiastes as a pessimistic, even nihilistic, text, Gabelman argues that Qoheleth employs his observation that human existence is mere breath or vapor (KJV "vanity") to recommend a life of "simple enjoyment": "There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil" (Ecc. 2:24; Gabelman 40). Knowing the world as transitory, says Gabelman, also frees people to transform themselves. Christians are liberated to, as C. S. Lewis puts it, "dress up as" and thus eventually become "conformed to" Christ. Letting go of everyday seriousness, as one does during Carnival, allows people to perceive and perhaps to abandon their everyday faults. In his discussion of the festival as holy or enchanted time, Gabelman draws on Shakespeare (specifically *A Midsummer Night's Dream*), Bakhtin, Barth, and Moltmann, among others.

In the second part of the book, "MacDonald's Fairytale Levity," Gabelman explores the application of these ideas in MacDonald's fairytales. Chapter 5, "Never so Real as When They Are Solemn," observes that, while most Victorians viewed imaginative or humorous literature as mere escapism, MacDonald believed that "light" literature could address "serious" concerns. Chapter 6, "Fairyland's Festive Sabbath," asserts that MacDonald's fairytales

help readers to free themselves from their mundane perspectives. Chapter 7, "Space: Fairyland's Ecstatic Cosmology," characterizes MacDonald's fairytales as quest-narratives. Chapter 8, "Transformation: Shall Not the Possible Become the Real?," examines the fairytales as agents of personal change.

In this second section, Gabelman asserts that the tone of lightness MacDonald adopts in many of his fairytales is calculated to elicit a "light" approach to life—the holy approach to life—in his readers. MacDonald valued the fairytale for precisely the reason many of his fellow Victorians distrusted it: its failure to produce a clear "moral" and its liability to many different interpretations. MacDonald saw the fairytale's "frivolous" indeterminacy as a virtue because he believed that a reader's "playing" with many different meanings would stretch him or her toward the "region of the uncomprehended" (98). The "once upon a time" of Fairyland is a liminal time, like festival time or twilight, that allows readers to slip outside of their habitual selves and concerns and even, as in Carnival, to invert them, as Jesus' teachings (the last will be first) inverted many of his own culture's commonplace truths. MacDonald's Fairylands are liminal spaces, worlds more like that which God intended, where spirit acts directly upon matter. (The miracles of Jesus, Gabelman claims, make it clear that God intends matter to be plastic to a spirit which is "at home" in God.) Thus the reading of a fairytale does not allow a reader to abandon reality, but to experience a deepened reality.

MacDonald's fairytales, says Gabelman, are quest-narratives expressing what their author believed to be a fundamental human desire: to go home to God. The reading of a fairytale not only sharpens the reader's desire for his or her divine home, but teaches the reader to perceive the marvelous in what most people experience as ordinary. MacDonald firmly believed that all nature was sacramental for those with eyes to see, and by showing the wonderful behind the commonplace, MacDonald was attempting, in his fairytales, to give his readers such eyes.

Thus, Gabelman explains that MacDonald believed that genuine encounter with a fairytale could transform the world for the reader, and transform the reader for the world. Imaginatively entering such a story could help the readers see both the world's vanity and their own, distancing them from commonplace worries and concerns, detaching them from their "normal" selves, enabling them both to see and to be more truly. In a short concluding chapter, "The Haunting Force of Levity," Gabelman observes that both G. K. Chesterton and C. S. Lewis validated this belief by testifying that they and their worldviews had been profoundly shaped by their reading of MacDonald's fairytales. Thus, Gabelman's thesis is that the "high moral function" of MacDonald's fairytale "levity" is to enable readers to take "the self and the world lightly" (201).

In presenting both Victorian fairytales and the Victorian attitude toward fairytales, Gabelman cites the work of Charles Dickens, George Eliot, Mathew Arnold, Oscar Wilde, Lewis Carroll, Maria Edgeworth, Thomas Carlyle, and John Ruskin. His explanations of MacDonald's religious and critical ideas are well supported from primary material, and he deals with many, if not most, of MacDonald's fairy stories, including the longer ones such as *The Princess* books.

MacDonald's fantasies and fairytales have received more critical attention than any of the many other genres in which he worked. He wrote over 25 three-decker novels, which are now largely forgotten; he wrote poetry, literary criticism, sermons, and theological essays, which are selectively appreciated mostly by the evangelical community. His fantasies and fairytales alone continue to receive respectful attention even from secular scholars. Nonetheless, Gabelman's book is the first text to explicitly address the theological significance of MacDonald's "levity" in writing fairytales, and, as such, it breaks new critical ground.

Gabelman brings together a convincing explication of traditional concepts ("levity," of course, but also *kenosis*, ecstasy, holy folly, vanity, carnival, festival, transformation) and a solid exegesis of some of MacDonald's own literary and theological writing to support his claims about the "serious" significance of MacDonald's fairytale levity. I believe his argument to be valid and illuminating. And I speak as a MacDonald scholar who, before I read Gabelman's book, found the jocular tone of some of MacDonald's fairytales annoying and distracting, rather than a contribution to their author's philosophic message.

The interest this text may hold for readers of *Christianity and Literature* is made plain by the short series introduction provided by Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury. Williams writes that the purpose of the series (*The Making of the Christian Imagination*, edited by Stephen Prickett) is to look at creative minds that have a good claim to represent some of the most decisive and innovative cultural currents of the history of the West (and not only the West), in order to track the ways in which a distinctively Christian imagination makes possible their imaginative achievement (vii).

I have only a very few criticisms of the text to register. First, I found what you might call its spiral organization, with its central concepts historically exemplified in early chapters and then applied to MacDonald's text in later chapters, to lead to a sometimes-confusing redundancy: while every sentence in itself is clear, I occasionally found it difficult to keep track of the author's current point.

Second, I could have wished for a clearer distinction to be made between the different senses of "levity" in the discussions of individual fairytales. I'm not sure to what extent, in speaking of MacDonald's "levity," Gabelman refers to the facetious tone MacDonald adopts in some of the tales, or the fact that, as a genre, fairytales are "light" (as opposed to "serious") literature. Since he treats several fairytales that are anything but playful in tone (among them "The Golden Key" and "The Day Boy and the Night Girl") I assume he means primarily the second. Nonetheless, given the trouble he takes in his first chapter to multiply the possible meanings of the term, I would have appreciated some discussion (or at least acknowledgement) of the fact that many of MacDonald's fairytales do not in fact possess "levity" as it is commonly understood.

Finally, I find in Gabelman's text the same omission I find in many other texts examining MacDonald's canon: in its description of MacDonald's religiously based attitudes toward life, it ignores the important effect of MacDonald's ultimate optimism: that is, his universalism. MacDonald was absolutely convinced, not only

that all people would eventually find their home and their perfection in union with God, but that all animals would too; he almost stridently asserts this belief in many of his sermons, theological essays, and even some of his novels. A more typically quasi-Calvinist British Victorian Christian, living under the shadow of eternal damnation—if not his own, quite possibly that of people he cared about, and most certainly that of the majority of the human race—might well find childlike carelessness both irresponsible and inappropriate to one’s existential situation. But MacDonald’s deep conviction that “All shall be well”—eventually, for *everyone*—surely underlay his ability to recommend the grave levity of a child at play as the disposition most suited to the realities of human life.

Minor criticism aside, this text is a valuable and unique contribution to MacDonald scholarship and is worth being read by anyone seriously interested in the import of MacDonald’s fairytales.

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Benjamin Myers. *Lapse Americana*. New York: New York Quarterly Books, 2013. Pp. xvi + 120. \$14.95. ISBN 978-1-935520-71-9

After the success of his first book, *Elegy for Trains*, which won the 2011 Oklahoma Book Award for Poetry, Benjamin Myers released his layered and richly evocative second book, *Lapse Americana*. Comprised of 71 poems, and divided into four sections, the book carries readers to places where the past (personal, cultural, historical) mingles with the present. Or one might better say that in Myers’s poetry, the past *haunts* the present. Just as the past impacts the present world of the poems, many poems interact with the subject of death, whether taking it as the core subject, or making a passing reference to it. As the title also implies, the idea of “loss” (in its various manifestations) winds its way through Myers’s poems.

Lapse Americana establishes one of its other core subjects via the epigraphs of the “Prelude,” the epigraphs deriving from, respectively, the *Edda* and the book of Ecclesiastes. The former quotation points to “two ravens perched on Odin’s shoulder [. . .]. They are called Thought and Memory” (xiii). The latter, however, finds Solomon claiming that “There is no remembrance of former things; neither shall there be any remembrance of things that are to come with those that shall come after” (xiii). Following these companion statements, the poem “Spook House,” the sole poem in the “Prelude” section, recounts the speaker’s memory of visiting a county-fair ride called *Dante’s Inferno*. Myers develops the narrative of that memory and its larger significance in the book, and concludes with the speaker preparing for what is to come: “two black doors swung open/as we watched our