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Individual Doubt in George MacDonald's English Novels

Tim Baker

George MacDonald is primarily remembered for *Phantastes* (1858) and *Lilith* (1895), the adult fantasy novels which bookend his writing career, and to a lesser extent for children's fantasies such as *The Princess and the Goblin* (1871). Socially realistic and avowedly theological novels make up the vast majority of his output, however. Although extremely popular at the time of writing, MacDonald's fourteen Scottish novels, and especially his thirteen English ones, are now almost universally dismissed as minor works, significant only as precursors of the sentimental, 'kailyard' fictions of J.M. Barrie and Samuel Crockett, or as examples of moralizing sentimentality in Victorian fiction.[1] Robert Lee Wolff, in his controversial but still influential 1961 survey of MacDonald's fiction, *The Golden Key*, frames his brief discussion of these works in terms of 'incessant drudgery' and a descent 'to banality', even while admitting that they hold some interest, while Francis Russell Hart argues that the realistic novels should be read in light of the more famous fantasies: 'MacDonald's "novels" are actually theological romances, where the fantastic and the normal, the ideal and the real, are separated only by semivisible and

[1] Stephen Prickett makes a compelling case for reading MacDonald's fantasies as his most significant work, while the rest of his novels are merely 'a mixture of acutely observed local colour and stylised plot dominated by heavy moralising'. Stephen Prickett, *Romanticism and Religion: The Tradition of Coleridge and Wordsworth in the Victorian Church* (Cambridge, 1976), 247. In this he follows G.K. Chesterton, C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien and W.H. Auden, all of whom praised MacDonald extravagantly either as a 'mythopoeic' or religious writer and ignored his realistic work. A great many of MacDonald's critics begin their articles with citations from one of these authors, and, in Catherine Durie's words, 'the popularity of Lewis's writings his revitalized interest especially in America'. Catherine Durie, 'George MacDonald and C.S. Lewis' in William Raeper (ed.), *The Gold Thread: Essays on George MacDonald* (Edinburgh, 1990), 162. Indeed, America is the only country in which MacDonald's non-fantastical works are currently in print, albeit only in abridged editions. However, Prickett, Wolff and Raeper all count the number of MacDonald's realist works inaccurately and may regard these works as minor due to a lack of close engagement with the texts themselves. While this article will not make a claim for their literary merit, many of these works show an imagination and philosophical perspective equal to that of the fantasies.

shifting boundaries'.[2] While critics such as David S. Robb, William Raeper and Stephen Prickett have all contributed to a broader understanding of MacDonald's realistic works, especially in their concern with a rehabilitation of the Scottish novels, the true import of these novels has yet to be adequately recognised.[3] In their focus on the relationship between the individual and the community, and between the individual and God, these works can be read not only as moral fables, but as significant works of theological philosophy in their own right.[4] More particularly, MacDonald's consistent references to post-Enlightenment and Idealist thinkers reveals new dimensions of the legacy of German thought in nineteenth-century Scottish letters.

The influence of eighteenth-century German thought on MacDonald's novels has long been established. The adult fantasies are filled with explicit references to Novalis, most particularly, and owe much of their structure and imagery to E.T.A. Hoffman and Goethe. Many critics who have recognised these influences use them to support the notion that MacDonald's work is ultimately based not in social realism, but in fantastical imagination; Roderick McGillis writes, for instance, that: 'When MacDonald paraphrases Novalis … he expresses not only utopian hope and desire, but also a belief in the efficacy of the fairy tale', while Robb argues that in both the novels and the fantasies, 'MacDonald's basic aim is the same: to follow the example of Novalis in romanticizing the commonplace'.[5] Prickett, along the same

[2] Robert Lee Wolff, *The Golden Key: A Study in the Fiction of George MacDonald* (New Haven, 1961), 267; Francis Russell Hart, *The Scottish Novel: A Critical Survey* (London, 1978), 101.

[3] David S. Robb, for instance, argues that while 'implied theology' is certainly important in MacDonald, 'Surely the Scots utterance, and also what can only be called the intimacy of address to the deity, helped unlock MacDonald's imagination'. David S. Robb, 'George MacDonald's Scottish Novels' in Raeper (ed.), *The Gold Thread*, 15.

[4] A dominant contemporary strand of criticism views MacDonald primarily as a Christian apologist, as can be found in Kerry Dearborn's recent monograph, where she argues that: 'Because MacDonald yearned above all to attend to God's Spirit, the truth he communicated expresses enduring wisdom … [O]ne may experience in reading MacDonald an awakening from the commonplace to experience more fully the reality of God's ways'. Kerry Dearborn, *Baptized Imagination: The Theology of George MacDonald* (Aldershot, 2006), 66. Similarly, Miho Yamaguchi, in the only full-length critique of the Thomas Wingfold novels, claims that MacDonald's 'unique theology challenges us to seek God's love and truth with our own eyes'. Miho Yamaguchi, *George MacDonald's Challenging Theology of the Atonement, Suffering, and Death* (Tucson, AZ, 2007), 127. Such readings, while common in American religious publications, will not be addressed in this article, which will instead focus on the more rigorously philosophical aspects of MacDonald's theology.

[5] Roderick McGillis, '"A Fairytale is Just a Fairytale": George MacDonald and the

lines, writes that 'German writers of the late eighteenth-century literary renaissance were … little-known, and even exotic, figures to the more insular British readership of the 1850s', and in them MacDonald found a long-awaited 'romance' and 'mysticism'.[6] This perspective has been challenged in recent articles by William N. Gray and Ruth Y. Jenkins, who use the work of Julia Kristeva to argue that 'MacDonald fails to follow through the dialectic of Novalis'.[7] Yet the extent of the German influence in MacDonald's work is far greater than these critics have allowed, and while his relationship with Novalis is especially clear, it is by no means the only example of a German influence. Throughout his English novels MacDonald repeatedly cites German thinkers to support his own philosophical arguments. While his fantasies quote Novalis primarily to highlight the importance of dreams and the imagination, and of transcending the commonplace, in his other novels he cites German thinkers to more explicitly theological ends. This is especially apparent in the English novels. While his fantasies are largely concerned with the importance of dreams, and his Scottish novels can be productively read as defences of passing customs and language, MacDonald focuses in his English novels on the entwined concepts of individual scepticism and free will.

At its most fundamental level, MacDonald's thought locates individual freedom in the surrender of human will to God's will. As he writes in the early novel *Guild Court* (1868):

> A man must do his duty, if he would be a free man, whether he likes it or not. But if he can regard it as the will of God … surely even the irksomeness of his work will no longer be insuperable … [I]n yielding

Queering of Fairy', *Marvels & Tales: Journal of Fairy-Tale Studies*, 17 (2003), 94; David S. Robb, 'Realism and Fantasy in the Fiction of George MacDonald' in Douglas Gifford (ed.), *The History of Scottish Literature: Volume 3, Nineteenth Century* (Aberdeen, 1988), 279.

[6] Stephen Prickett, 'Fictions and Metafictions: *Phantastes*, *Wilhelm Meister* and the Idea of the *Bildungsroman*' in Raeper (ed.), *The Gold Thread*, 122. Rosemary Ashton, on the contrary, writes that: 'by 1840 German literature was on the whole both acceptable to British taste and accessible to those who knew no German'. Rosemary Ashton, *The German Idea: Four English Writers and the Reception of German Thought, 1800–1860* (1980; London, 1994), 22. The difference may be explained in terms of genre: while German poetry and drama were certainly far more familiar in this period, philosophy and theology were still treated with suspicion, especially in small communities, as evidenced by MacDonald's dismissal from his post at Arundel.

[7] William N. Gray, 'George MacDonald, Julia Kristeva, and the Black Sun', *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900*, 36 (1996), 891.

> his own way and taking God's, lay the only *freedom* of which the human being, made in the image of God, is capable.[8]

Phrased in this way, MacDonald's philosophy appears neither wholly original nor especially Germanic, and any attempt to study his thinking in light of German thought must bear in mind Rosemary Ashton's criticism of Thomas Carlyle, in which she argues that while Carlyle believed he owed his notion of self denial to readings of Goethe, Fichte and Novalis, they were equally 'a product of his Calvinism'.[9] In many instances, MacDonald cites German thinkers not in order to disseminate their thought, but to lend credence to his own philosophical system, itself often far removed from his nominal influences.

The development of MacDonald's interest in German philosophy, however, is especially noteworthy in contrast to the often hostile reception such philosophy was accorded at the time. His first extensive encounter with German texts can be dated to 1842, long after the initial enthusiasm expressed by Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Carlyle, but well in advance of James Hutchison Stirling's publication of *The Secret of Hegel* in 1865. In 1836, the Church of Scotland drew up a petition to prevent the teaching of German philosophy.[10] So too Thomas Chalmers, who would embrace the Kantian tradition late in life, cautioned several years later:

> For those who are not inclined to study German philosophy, I do not recommend that they should suspend it for their ordinary readings. Their very ignorance of the German idealism, the very confinement of their mental philosophy to the doctrines and metaphysics of the Scottish school, are guarantees in themselves against the deleterious influence of these outlandish speculations.[11]

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[8] George MacDonald, *Guild Court* (1868; London, 1908), 54, 168. Italics in original.

[9] Ashton, *The German Idea*, 89. George Davie's defence of James Ferrier similarly seeks to locate what has traditionally been read as a German influence as authentically Scottish: 'While the rational tendency in his critique of intuitionism was doubtless inspired by German philosophy, his general position was very much in the Scottish tradition'. George Elder Davie, *The Democratic Intellect: Scotland and Her Universities in the Nineteenth Century* (Edinburgh, 1961), 280. Unlike Carlyle and Ferrier, however, MacDonald seems almost unaware of the Scottish tradition, and explicitly emphasises the importance of German thought repeatedly throughout his work.

[10] Davie, *The Democratic Intellect*, 35.

[11] Quoted in Alexander Campbell Fraser, *Biographia Philosophica: A Retrospect* (Edinburgh and London, 1904), 74.

While scholars such as Andrew Seth Pringle-Pattison would later defend Fichte, particularly, late in the nineteenth century, there was a sharp division between Scottish Common Sense philosophy and German influences until 1880.[12] In many respects, the link between consciousness of the self and consciousness of God established in MacDonald only reaches its culmination in the work of Edward Caird in the early 1890s.[13] MacDonald's unique combination of German philosophy with both dissenting and Anglican religious traditions in the 1860s and 1870s represents a staunchly individualistic theological perspective. MacDonald's use of German philosophy can thus be seen both as a bridge between Carlyle and later scholars and as an often contrary reading of post-Kantian thought and early Romantic thought.

Although MacDonald never mentions contemporary developments in the reception of German philosophy, it is possible to separate his career into two distinct stages that in many ways mirror a more general engagement with eighteenth-century German thought. Although MacDonald's first English trilogy, which is made up of *Annals of a Quiet Neighbourhood* (1867), *The Seaboard Parish* (1868) and *The Vicar's Daughter* (1871), is often read as autobiographical, concerning MacDonald's time at Arundel – the church from which he was removed on grounds of Germanism in 1852 – he presents a moral vision in these novels that is relatively close to contemporary dissenting theologies.[14] As the title of the first volume suggests, the novels follow in the tradition of John Galt's *Annals of the Parish* (1821) in their relatively un-dramatic presentation of a small-town vicar and his family, albeit with a shift from history to religion as a central theme. Throughout this trilogy, MacDonald employs a naïve Romanticism and straightforward religious teachings, and primarily presents the individual in relation to nature and art. In his second English trilogy – *Thomas Wingfold, Curate* (1876), *Paul Faber, Surgeon* (1878) and *There and Back* (1891) – however, MacDonald develops a far more complicated and challenging view of human freedom and will, one that may cite German

[12] David Fergusson, *Scottish Philosophical Theology 1700–2000* (Exeter, 2007), 18, 156; Davie, *The Democratic Intellect*, 303.

[13] Caird himself links Fichte and Carlyle, arguing that for both 'Religion ceases to be the worship of God who is revealed in outward nature … and becomes a reverence for a divine power that speaks only, or mainly, in the soul of the individual'. Edward Caird, *The Evolution of Religion*, Vol. 1 (Glasgow, 1893), 352. This argument can be seen as one of the cornerstones of MacDonald's late theology, as discussed at length below.

[14] Greville MacDonald ascribes his father's removal from the ministry to a charge 'originated in his *Songs of Novalis*: he was tainted with German Theology' but does not clarify further. Grenville MacDonald, *George MacDonald and His Wife* (London, 1924), 179.

thought less often, but that can be seen to be far more profoundly influenced by post-Enlightenment thinking. In these novels, MacDonald departs from mainstream Protestant theology to present individual reason as the only possible path to God.[15] MacDonald's English novels can thus be used to illustrate the range of Scottish – and more generally, British – responses to eighteenth-century German thought.

I: Novalis and Theology

The majority of critics who have considered MacDonald's English novels have done so primarily in relation to their theological, rather than narrative or stylistic, merit. Raeper's definitive biography, for instance, claims that in *The Seaboard Parish*, as in many other novels, what MacDonald has done 'is to press a series of sermons into a three-volume novel and use them, as he used all his novels, to address the theological and social questions of the day'.[16] MacDonald himself writes at the start of *The Seaboard Parish* that 'I have been so accustomed to preach all my life, that whatever I say or write will more or less take the shape of a sermon'.[17] For MacDonald, external experience is only of interest insofar as it sheds light on inner experience, in particular the path of the individual to God. He writes at the close of *Annals*, for instance, that: 'no man's life is fit for representation as a work of art save in proportion as there has been a significant relation between his outer and inner life, a visible outcome of some sort of harmony between them'.[18] Almost all of his early novels end with a summary in which the moral lessons imparted are clarified and repeated: these are not works written for the escapist pleasure of their audience, but for their moral improvement. Yet it is worth noting that, especially in the early novels, MacDonald's theological constructs are as likely to appear in discussions of literature as in formal sermons. MacDonald's novels are filled with literary references: George Herbert and John Donne

[15] Charles Taylor portrays such viewpoints as 'the great Victorian drama of unbelief', with twin ideals of 'self-responsible rational freedom' and 'a kind of heroism of unbelief'. Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge MA, 1989), 404. MacDonald's originality in these late works lies in his integration of these ideas with his earlier Romantic concerns, and in the explicit grounding of his writing in German thought.

[16] William Raeper, *George MacDonald* (Tring, 1987), 196.

[17] George MacDonald, *The Seaboard Parish* (1868; London, [1884]), 1.

[18] George MacDonald, *Annals of a Quiet Neighbourhood* (1867; 6th ed. London, 1887), 569.

are constant reference points, while Wordsworth and Coleridge figure heavily in the early novels, as does Tennyson in the late ones. Most importantly, however, MacDonald uses his fiction to advertise the merits of German poets and philosophers, including Heine, Goethe, Schiller, Jean Paul and especially Novalis.

MacDonald was well-known to his contemporaries as a German scholar, and while the particulars of his reading are unknown (Raeper cites Swedenborg, Boehme, Schelling, Fichte, Kant, Schleiermacher and the Schlegels among MacDonald's influences), it is widely agreed that he was as well-read in German literature and philosophy as any of his more-renowned peers.[19] In the early novels the reading of German poets and the singing of German songs – *Adela Cathcart* (1863) devotes an entire chapter to the singing of a song by Heine – are presented as paths to individual religious consciousness through an appreciation of literary form. A lengthy passage in *Seaboard* focuses on the fifth of Novalis' *Spiritual Songs* (1802), which the narrator's daughter finds has 'a lovely feeling [that belongs] only to the New Testament and [has] nothing to do with this world round about us'.[20] The New Testament and Novalis are held as twin paragons of a philosophy that, as Frederick C. Beiser writes, allows the individual to 'see things anew, as they are in themselves and for their own sakes, apart from their utility and common meaning'.[21] The reading of poetry – especially German but also, in a key passage in *Annals*, that of Wordsworth – allows the individual to develop his powers of contemplation, which in turn leads to salvation. As Prickett notes, MacDonald's idea that poetry is a '*theological* instrument' was 'not uncommon among nineteenth-century churchmen', yet the weight MacDonald gives it, as well as the particulars of his examples, is somewhat unusual.[22]

Although Novalis is cited in diverse contemporary novels such as Thomas Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886) and George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), it is likely that MacDonald's familiarity with his works comes not from the 1860 article by J.M. Ludlow in *Macmillan's Magazine* which re-introduced his work to the British public, but from both first-hand reading of the German texts and more especially from his friendship with, and the reading of, Carlyle and F.D. Maurice.[23] Maurice contributed an article to the

[19] Raeper, *George MacDonald* 49, 239.

[20] MacDonald, *The Seaboard Parish*, 461.

[21] Frederick C. Beiser, *The Early Political Writings of the German Romantics* (Cambridge, 1999), 101.

[22] Prickett, *Romanticism and Religion*, 86–7.

[23] W.E. Yuill, '"Character is Fate": A Note on Thomas Hardy, George Eliot and Novalis',

Athenaeum in 1829 that cited Goethe, Fichte, Novalis and Schlegel.[24] Yet the most influential early British criticism of Novalis can be found in Carlyle's 1829 article for the *Foreign Review*, with which MacDonald was undoubtedly familiar.[25] Carlyle devotes the bulk of his appraisal to lengthy translations, on the grounds that the reader will find in them: 'the strangest inquiries, new truths, or new possibilities of truth, a whole unexpected world of thought, where, whether for belief or denial, the deepest questions await us'.[26] Carlyle introduces Novalis as both a philosopher deeply indebted to Herder and Fichte – a preacher of 'the Majesty of Reason' – and as a 'Mystic'; he is both poet and thinker, and for Carlyle, the value of his thought is that it cannot be easily understood or systematised, but only appreciated for his beauty.[27] Yet although Carlyle is often at pains to connect Novalis with other post-Kantian thinkers, MacDonald's early use of Novalis's work is almost purely in the realm of aesthetic and religious thought.

Novalis is particularly used in MacDonald's work to illustrate the use of poetry to transcend the commonplace. In a contemporary essay on 'Forms of Literature', MacDonald juxtaposes the notion that 'what man is to this planet, what the eye is to man himself, Poetry is to Literature' with the image of meeting Novalis among the saints in heaven: 'Shall I not one day, "somewhere, somehow", clasp the large hand of Novalis, and, gazing on his face, compare his features with those of Saint John?'[28] Novalis is thus used both as an exemplar of Romanticism as a predominantly literary trope and, more unusually, as a religious figure in whose writings can be seen a path to the divine. As MacDonald makes clear, 'poetry', as symbolised by Novalis, is the meeting of the commonplace and the romantic.[29] He writes in *Annals*

Modern Language Review, 57 (1962), 402.

[24] Ashton, *The German Idea*, 107.

[25] Although MacDonald almost always cites Novalis in German, especially in the epigraphs in *Phantastes, Lilith* and *David Elginbrod*, almost every citation can also be found in the Carlyle article, including the line of which MacDonald was most fond – 'Our life is no dream, but it may and will perhaps become one' – which MacDonald was later to quote back to Carlyle in a letter of 1877.

[26] Thomas Carlyle, 'Novalis' in idem, *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays, Collected and Republished*, Vol. 1 (1869; London, 1887), 424.

[27] Ibid., 443. Indeed, for Carlyle the work of Novalis, Fichte and Kant forms a continuum: the former's work is 'in its essential lineaments synonymous with what little we understand of Fichte's, and might indeed, safely enough for our present purposes, be classed under the head of Kantism, or German metaphysics generally'. Ibid., 439.

[28] George MacDonald, *Orts* (London, 1882), 230.

[29] Dearborn acknowledges a Romantic influence in MacDonald's 'correlation of theology with poetry', but, despite a lengthy reading of Novalis, ultimately sees this relation

that 'The poetic region is the true one, and just, *therefore*, the incredible one to the lower order of mind; for although every mind is capable of the truth, or rather capable of becoming capable of the truth, there may lie ages between its capacity and the truth'.[30] This claim suggests Novalis' own definition of the Romantic, which is an operation of 'endowing the commonplace with a higher meaning, the ordinary with mysterious respect, the known with the dignity of the unknown, the finite with the appearance of the infinite'.[31] As Terry Pinkard has argued, Novalis 'embodied the twin commitments of early Romantic theory'—that we must be responsive to the world, and that our responses must be creative—in a way recognised and adopted by MacDonald.[32]

In MacDonald's explicitly Christian reading of Novalis, a response to the world also becomes a response to God: explaining the link between the natural and spiritual worlds, he writes in *Annals*: 'I always found the open air the most genial influence upon me for the production of religious feeling and thought'.[33] Nature is used both as an exemplar of things as they are—the world that God has made—and things as they should be—the world as God wills it. In *Seaboard*, for instance, he writes of nature's power both to restore human faith in the goodness of the world, and to open the human mind to greater glories: 'Often when life looked dreary about me, from some real or fancied injustice or indignity, has a thought of truth been flashed into my mind from a flower, a shape of frost, or even a lingering shadow—not to mention such glories as angel-winged clouds, rainbows, stars and sunrises'.[34] Like poetry, the study of nature awakens an individual consciousness. MacDonald here again is following Novalis, who writes in *The Novices of Sais* that: 'The ways of contemplating nature are innumerable; at one extreme the sentiment of nature becomes a jocose fancy, a banquet, while at the other it develops into the most devout religion, giving to a whole life direction, principle, meaning'.[35] This dual account of nature appears throughout MacDonald's first trilogy: passages of heightened pathetic fallacy and extreme sentimental-

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as stemming from MacDonald's unclearly defined 'Celtic background'. Dearborn, *Baptized Imagination*, 27.

[30] MacDonald, *Annals of a Quiet Neighbourhood*, 92. Italics in original

[31] Novalis, *Philosophical Writings*, Margaret Mahony Stolkar (trans. and ed.) (Albany, 1997), 60.

[32] Terry Pinkard, *German Philosophy 1760–1860: The Legacy of Idealism* (Cambridge, 2002), 148.

[33] MacDonald, *Annals of a Quiet Neighbourhood*, 246.

[34] MacDonald, *The Seaboard Parish*, 437.

[35] Novalis, *The Novices of Sais*, Ralph Manheim (trans.) (Brooklyn, 2005), 31.

ism are juxtaposed with scenes in which the individual experience of nature is posited as leading to the individual experience of God. As in Novalis, God 'is the goal of nature'.[36]

In his accounts of both nature and art, MacDonald thus follows a traditional and uncomplicated reading of Novalis; at this stage in his career, he does not take into account the issues of subjectivity and mediation which modern critics such as Andrew Bowie view as central to Novalis' philosophical project.[37] MacDonald's predominantly Romantic notion of individuality is located in the two-fold response to nature and the world and the development of individual creativity. It is only in this latter context – primarily with regard to literature, although on occasion he shifts his focus to painting – that he begins to introduce the theme of individuality that becomes central to his later work. MacDonald's early stance on individuality can be seen both in relation to Ruskin, whose influence is felt throughout *The Seaboard Parish*, and Novalis, particularly in *Adela Cathcart*. In the former, MacDonald writes that the individual 'is a centre of crystallization' who, as an artist, portrays the world not as it is, but 'what nature has shown to him, determined by his nature and choice. With it is mingled therefore so much of his own individuality … that you have not only a representation of an aspect of nature, as far as that may be with limited powers and materials, but a revelation of the man's own mind and nature.'[38] This revelation of individual perception is not without risks, for individual representative art can be misleading, but it is important because only once the individual consciousness has been established can God be approached. This is the heart of MacDonald's early theology: art and nature, in disparate ways, awaken the individual power of contemplation. Once awake, that power can begin to contemplate the divine, through the intermediation of Jesus. As he writes in *Cathcart*, introducing a lengthy passage from Novalis: 'Before it [freedom in the knowledge of God] comes true for the race, it must be done in the individual. If it be true for the race, it can only be through its being attainable by the individual. There must be something in the story belonging to the individual. I will look at the individual Christ, and see how he arose.'[39]

MacDonald here closely follows one of Novalis' notes on Fichte, where he writes: 'If a thing is determined in the whole, then it is also determined in the

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[36] Novalis, *Philosophical Writings*, 123.

[37] Andrew Bowie, *Aesthetics and Subjectivity: From Kant to Nietzsche* (2nd ed. Manchester, 2003).

[38] MacDonald, *The Seaboard Parish*, 197.

[39] George MacDonald, *Adela Cathcart* (1863; London, [1882?]), 132.

individual'.[40] His shift from a focus on the individual artist to the individual Christ has no explicit antecedent in Novalis, but fits generally with the work of other key figures in early Romanticism, most particularly Johann Georg Hamann and Johann Gottfried Herder. Isaiah Berlin, for instance, summarises both thinkers in relation to the role of the individual artist: 'For them a work of art is the expression of somebody, it is always a voice speaking. A work of art is the voice of one man addressing other men.'[41] Hamann and Herder both celebrate the multiplicity of the individual in relation to a whole, that is, God. For Herder, the more 'life and reality' a being has in relation to the whole, the more it is an individual or a self.[42] For Hamann, not dissimilarly, the response of the individual to a given essence, be it God or nature, comes in wholeness and multiplicity.[43] The individual is thus located in terms of responsiveness to the world, and more particularly for MacDonald in the necessity of a response to God, known through Christ, and in the appearance of a creative output. It would be an overstatement to argue that MacDonald consciously based his theological and aesthetic doctrines around a detailed understanding of writers such as Hamann and Herder, although he may have been familiar with some of their writings. His account of the individual human's relation to Christ, which he attributes to Novalis, closely resembles his friend Maurice's account of Herder, in which 'a belief in a Person, attachment to a Person, more than to a notion, either theological or ethical, would seem to have been in accordance with the tone of his mind and of his teaching'.[44] Yet in these works from the first decade of his career, MacDonald is beginning to develop a theory of the individual's relation to God and to art that takes many of the precepts of German Romanticism into account.

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[40] Novalis, *Fichte Studies*, Jane Kneller (ed.) (Cambridge, 2003), 161. Novalis elsewhere terms Jesus 'pure personality' but never approaches the central Christian impulse found in Hamann and Herder. Ibid., 57.

[41] Isaiah Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism*, Henry Hardy (ed.) (London, 2000), 59.

[42] Johann Gottfried Herder, *God: Some Conversations* Frederick H. Burkhardt (ed. and trans) (New York, 1949), 213.

[43] James C. O'Flaherty, *Hamann's Socratic Memorabilia: A Translation and Commentary* (Baltimore, 1967), 47; Bowie, *Aesthetics and Subjectivity*, 6.

[44] Frederick Denison Maurice, *Modern Philosophy; or, a Treatise of Moral and Metaphysical Philosophy from the Fourteenth Century to the French Revolution, with a Glimpse into the Nineteenth Century* (London, 1862), 643. The relationship between Maurice and MacDonald is well documented. Of greatest interest to this paper, however, is Greville MacDonald's assertion that while there was not 'any sort of difference between' the two, 'Where Professor Maurice was concerned primarily with the Church's relation to God, my father's interest was with individuals'. MacDonald, *George MacDonald and His Wife*, 400–1. The significance of this interest will be developed below.

The most comprehensive account of MacDonald's early views comes in *Wilfrid Cumbermede* (1872), labelled as autobiographical but largely believed to be inspired by Ruskin's life. *Cumbermede* is arguably the most linear and eventful of MacDonald's English novels, and while it includes fewer explicit discussions of literary value than the preceding trilogy, it is at times strongly reminiscent of varied sources including Augustine's *Confessions*, Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* (1836) and Dickens' *Great Expectations* (1861). The novel can be read as the story of Cumbermede's gradual development into a Romantic sensibility and as a primer to many of MacDonald's prevailing themes. Early in the novel Cumbermede speaks of the immediate experience of nature that he will later find in the English Romantics:

> The prophets of the new blessing, Wordsworth and Coleridge, I knew nothing of. Keats was only beginning to write … Yet I was under the same spell as they all. Nature was a power upon me. I was filled with the vague recognition of a present soul in Nature – with a sense of the humanity everywhere diffused through her and operating on ours.[45]

Art here is thus a secondary experience that reflects an originary experience of nature. Cumbermede's adolescent thoughts on nature are almost immediately followed by a passage in which, alone on a German hillside, he undergoes an experience of isolation and doubt which leads to religious awakening: 'It was as if something divine within me awoke to outface the desolation. I felt that it was time to act, and that I could act.'[46] From this point forth, Cumbermede directly relates many of MacDonald's preoccupations: not only does he reference Jean Paul and Heine at length, but he discusses the importance of dreams, as in Novalis, the belief in the salvation of animals (the doctrine which may have resulted in MacDonald's removal from the church and that appears at ever-increasing length in his novels), and even the myth of Lilith, which is not provided in the novel of that name. Midway through the novel Cumbermede's friend Charley provides one of MacDonald's clearest explications of the relation between religion, nature and art:

> 'you lead yourself inevitably to a God manifest in nature – not as a powerful being – that is a theme absolutely without interest to me – but

[45] George MacDonald, *Wilfrid Cumbermede: An Autobiographical Story* (1872; 4th ed. London, 1886), 131–2.

[46] Ibid., 147.

> as possessed in himself of the original pre-existent beauty, the counterpart of which in us we call art, and who has fashioned us so that we must fall down and worship the image of himself which he has set up.'[47]

MacDonald's theology here owes much to both Novalis and Schleiermacher, who, as Theodore Beiser argues, provided the stimulus for the 'romantic religious revival'.[48] For Schleiermacher, as will be discussed at greater length below, religious consciousness arises from the consciousness of the universe, not from the following of religious traditions.[49] Here, in focusing on the originary experience of nature and, unusually, completely eliding any mention of churches or sermons, MacDonald both follows certain early Romantics and begins to develop the antipathy towards all orthodoxies and dogmas which will become a dominant theme in his later work. As MacDonald will argue at much greater length in the Thomas Wingfold novels, 'religious theories'–that is, the conventional practice of religion–work in opposition to individual religious experience, which is obtained in nature and in art.[50]

Cumbermede thus suggests many of the theological precepts which MacDonald will develop four years later, but places them in the context of Romantic perspectives on art and nature. It is also MacDonald's subtlest novel, at least in respect of his appropriation of German Romanticism, as can be seen in the final chapter. Even as he repeatedly writes of the importance of Novalis in his conception of literature, MacDonald rarely adopts any of the formal elements that make the work of the early Romantics so distinctive. Here, however, in the final chapter, he displays a tendency to fragmentation similar to that found in the works of many Jena school authors, a fragmentation that, as Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy argue, 'finally dislocates and 'unworks' texts … that should have been sheltered from such an accident by their genre'.[51] While for its first 500 pages *Cumbermede* is the

[47] Ibid., 298.

[48] Beiser, *Early Political Writings of the German Romantics*, xix. MacDonald quotes Schleiermacher as early as 1863, in *David Elginbrod* (1863; London, [1871]).

[49] Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers*, Richard Crouter (trans and ed.) (2nd ed., Cambridge, 1996), 106.

[50] MacDonald, *Wilfrid Cumbermede*, 480.

[51] Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*, Philip Barnard and Cheryl Lester (trans) (Albany, 1988), 59. The importance of the fragment in Novalis is also seen by Carlyle, who notes his 'detached expositions and combinations, deep, brief glimpses'. Carlyle, 'Novalis', 443.

most traditionally plot-driven of MacDonald's novels, containing none of the authorial interventions or sermonizing of his other work, it reaches its conclusion just short of the expected climactic resolution. Instead, the final chapter consists of inconclusive fragments, expressing both Cumbermede's doubts and the impossibility of the novel form to represent adequately a life still in progress. The final fragment points to the expected conclusion – one of marriage and forgiveness – but at the last moment turns, if not to God as such, to an expression of will:

> She has sent for me. I go to her. I will not think beforehand what I shall say.
>
> Something within tells me that a word from her would explain all that sometimes even now seems so inexplicable as hers. Will she speak that word? Shall I pray her for that word? I know nothing. The pure Will be done![52]

This turn from individual doubt to 'pure Will' will itself become the focal point of MacDonald's later work. Presented here, however, without authorial interpretation, it can be seen only as a fragment, and perhaps the truest example of the influence of Novalis on MacDonald's work.

II: Thomas Wingfold and Fichte

Thomas Wingfold, Curate initially appears to repeat the concerns of the earlier English novels. The opening chapters invoke Heine and Wordsworth in order to present a Romantic view of nature as the unrecognised truth of daily life. Yet as the plot develops, these Romantic notions are discarded in favour of a more complex theology of individuality. The central narrative concerns the struggle of a young curate to leave behind the preaching of written sermons and to speak the truth from the pulpit, even when the truth is that he has lost his faith and can only approach God through doubt. Wingfold's story of gradual redemption is less dramatic, and has received less critical attention, than that of Leopold Lingard, whose murder of a young woman while under the influence of opium is perhaps the most shocking and amoral moment in MacDonald's fiction. Concentrating on this latter story, Wolff argues that in

[52] MacDonald, *Wilfrid Cumbermede*, 520.

Thomas Wingfold MacDonald was 'preaching evil … Against the background of violence and illegality, which MacDonald almost excuses, the sentimental vaporings of the curate and his deformed advisers about the study of Christ's life as an incentive to faith seem particularly offensive'.[53] MacDonald himself suggests the ease with which this interpretation can be reached, as Mrs Ramshorn summarises Wingfold's sermons as 'teaching people, in fact, that the best thing they could do was to commit some terrible crime, in order thereby to attain a better innocence than without it could ever be theirs'.[54] MacDonald here deviates sharply from what J. Hillis Miller calls the moralistic realism of Dickens, Thackeray and Trollope, wherein realistic depictions of life will show the consequences of good and bad acts, and inspire the reader to choose the good.[55] To concentrate on the amorality of Leopold's actions and the relative ease with which he is forgiven by his family and friends is to ignore MacDonald's central argument, however, in which murder and unthinking support of church doctrines are both presented as sinful, not in relation to conventional proscribed morality, but because they turn the individual away from God. It is only in an affirmation of self as self, whether achieved through repentance or through the establishment of sceptical doubt, that any salvation can be achieved. As MacDonald wrote in a letter of 1866: 'doubt is the hammer that breaks the windows clouded with human fancies, and lets in the pure light'.[56]

This centrality of the relationship between the individual and God is initially presented by Polwarth, a deformed dwarf – indeed, he is explicitly presented as a goblin in *Paul Faber*.[57] This is done in terms almost identical to those in the *Princess* books – and later adopted by Wingfold. For Polwarth, like Cumbermede, isolation gives rise to individualisation: 'The isolation that belonged to my condition wrought indeed to the intensifying of my individuality … I learned to pray the sooner for the loneliness, and the heartier from the solitude which was as a chamber with closed door.'[58] This isolated state gives rise to a form of idealism, in which:

> Either the whole frame of existence … is a wretched, miserable unfitness, a chaos with dreams of a world, a chaos in which the higher is

[53] Wolff, *The Golden Key*, 298–9.
[54] George MacDonald, *Thomas Wingfold, Curate* (1876; 4th ed., London, 1887), 346.
[55] J. Hillis Miller, *Victorian Subjects* (Durham, 1991), 32.
[56] MacDonald, *George MacDonald and his Wife*, 374.
[57] George MacDonald, *Paul Faber, Surgeon* (1878; 6th ed., London, [1890?]), 387–8.
[58] MacDonald, *Thomas Wingfold* 83.

> for ever subject to the lower, or it is an embodied idea growing towards perfection in him who is the one perfect creative Idea, the Father of lights who suffers himself that he may bring his many sons into the glory which is his own glory.[59]

This vision of the world as a potentially static chaos is almost completely opposed to the way in which Novalis and Friedrich Schlegel present chaos as a creative force. Indeed, if one follows the critical consensus that MacDonald uses Novalis as a buttress for his own fairy-tale ideology, this passage suggests a repudiation of his earlier thought. For Novalis, the relationship between chaos and accomplished creation is the same as that between the fairy tale and 'the world of truth (history)'—both opposed and similar.[60] In presenting that relationship not as creative, but as ultimately destructive, MacDonald appears to be turning away from Novalis. In *Thomas Wingfold* Novalis is mentioned only once, in the context of a rather indeterminate discussion of the possibility of heaven. The institution of individual doubt as a predominant theme not only moves MacDonald away from conventional religious perspectives, but also from his earlier focus on Romantic notions of art and the imagination.

MacDonald nevertheless continues to present his theological argument in the context of a nominal idealism, as Wingfold reflects that 'the vision of the ideal woke the ideal in yourself".[61] The primary concern in his theology, however, is less with the ideal than with the self that is open to it. Wingfold finds faith enough to preach, although he repeatedly insists that he has no special claim to knowledge, while Helen (his love and Leopold's sister) resigns herself not to any certain faith, but to 'give her life' in the search for a God who may or may not exist.[62] Wingfold's final position is surprisingly similar to Hume's Philo in *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1779), who argues that: 'To be a philosophical sceptic is, in a man of letters, the first and most essential step towards being a sound, believing Christian'.[63] Scepticism and doubt are important for MacDonald precisely because they are facets of the individual experience. The triumph of individual reason over received religion returns MacDonald to a modified Enlightenment perspective, in which individual consciousness is perceived as the supreme good. Polwarth,

[59] Ibid., 88.

[60] Novalis, *Philosophical Writings*, 126.

[61] MacDonald, *Thomas Wingfold*, 197.

[62] Ibid., 504.

[63] David Hume, *Dialogues on Natural Religion and The Natural History of Religion*, J.C.A. Gaskin (ed.) (Oxford, 1998), 130.

who is perhaps the closest the novel comes to presenting a conventionally devout Christian, believes it is an 'awful thing' that 'this feeble individuality of ours, the offspring of God's individuality, should have some power, and even more will than power, to close its door against him, and keep house without him!'[64] And yet, in *Paul Faber*—the novel which in many ways resolves the crises of *Wingfold*—individual will is itself presented as the path to God: 'the will of the individual sides divinely with his divine impulse, and his heart is unified in good. When the will of the man sides perfectly with the holy impulses in him, then all is well; for then his mind is one with the mind of his maker; God and man are one.'[65] Individual will is thus presented neither as a perfect and necessary path to God, nor as an obstruction, but as instead the necessary precondition to religious thought, or indeed any thought at all. It is only through doubt, whether it is originated in purely philosophical terms, as with Wingfold, or from physical experience, as for Leopold and to a certain extent Polwarth, that any notion of the individual can be reached, and it is only through consciousness of the self as an individual will that the self can come to God.

MacDonald presents a theology and moral philosophy in *Thomas Wingfold* that, in its focus on individual conscience, appears little-related to either prevailing religious customs or his own early Romanticism. However, his ideas can be better appreciated in the context not only of early Romanticism, but also of late-Enlightenment thought. In recent years, Robert Pippin and Terry Pinkard, along with Judith Butler, have argued that the Kantian paradox is the basis of post-Kantian idealism.[66] This paradox, briefly outlined, stipulates that if we are to impose a principle on ourselves, we must have a reason to do so. For that principle to be binding, it must be self-imposed, yet if that principle arises from outside ourselves, it cannot be said to be self-imposed. This paradox, as will be shown below, lies at the heart of MacDonald's late writings, but its influence on Idealist thought can be most clearly seen in the work of Fichte. For Fichte, the solution to the Kantian paradox is to recognise that Kant's dichotomy between subject and object is itself subjectively established. Our thoughts about reality and the structure of reality are, through intellectual intuition, the same. Consciousness, as Fichte introduces his *System of Ethics* (1798), 'rests on the various aspects of this separation of what is subjective

[64] MacDonald, *Thomas Wingfold*, 206.
[65] MacDonald, *Paul Faber*, 422.
[66] Pinkard, *German Philosophy 1760–1860*, 58–60.

from what is objective, and, in turn, on the unification of the two'.[67] All knowledge, then, is knowledge of the self. The world cannot then be 'an alien being', but is something that, because it is formed from the individual's own thought, can finally be known.[68] Fichte thus, as Bowie argues, radicalises the Kantian subjective turn, both by making the world into a product of the 'I' and by exploring the structures of self-consciousness itself.[69] The 'I' is not an object, but a normative status that can only be achieved through a process of self-recognition; it is only once the 'I' can be seen, through an act of will, as the foundation of reason, that the world can be known. Consciousness of self-activity is the only ground of freedom and will.

From this insight, Fichte develops not only a system of science and knowledge, but also of faith and morality. The realisation of being, through the will, is for Fichte a matter of faith. 'Our philosophy', he writes, 'begins with an item of faith', where faith is: 'a decision of the will to recognize the validity of knowledge'.[70] Only through faith can anything be known as real. This, in turn, leads to the absolute, for only through the combination of the two parts of the self, consciousness and 'free obedience', can the self be 'connected with the One *which is there*, and take part in its being'.[71] For Fichte, the will is ultimately the will to be one with God, although he touches upon this only briefly, and in difficult terms 'The complete annihilation of the individual and the fusion of the latter into the absolutely pure form of reason or into God is indeed the ultimate goal of finite reason; but this is not possible in any time'.[72] For both Novalis and Fichte, God is the ultimate goal of freedom and will, but as this goal is impossible within the context of linear time and human life, they frequently only allude to the more explicitly theological elements in their ethical systems.

Instead, Fichte locates the immediate focus on individual will not in unification with the absolute, but in relation to moral duty. This link is made explicit in Novalis' *Fichte Studies*, where he writes: 'Morality must be the core of our existence, if it is to be for us what it wants to be. Its end, its origin, must be the *ideal of being*. An unending *realization of being*

[67] Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *The System of Ethics*, Daniel Breazeale and Günter Zöller (trans and eds) (Cambridge, 2005), 7.

[68] Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *The Vocation of Man*, Peter Preuss (trans) (Indianapolis, 1987), 75.

[69] Bowie, *Aesthetics and Subjectivity*, 70.

[70] Fichte, *System of Ethics*, 31; Fichte, *Vocation of Man*, 71.

[71] Fichte, *Vocation of Man*, 107. Italics in original.

[72] Fichte, *System of Ethics*, 143.

would be the vocation of the I.'[73] Morality consists in the consciousness of determinate duty, a consciousness that is not immediate, but 'is found through an act of thinking'.[74] Once this duty has been found, however, it becomes an immediate consciousness, through the recognition that this determinate something is a duty.[75] In order to be human, an individual needs to achieve consciousness of himself, a consciousness that lies in the recognition of freedom. Morality, and the path to God, lies in recognizing the consciousness and freedom of all other individuals. 'Everyone becomes God', Fichte writes:

> so long as one preserves the freedom of all individuals. It is precisely by means of this disappearance and annihilation of one's entire individuality that everyone becomes a pure presentation of the moral law in the world of sense and thus becomes a 'pure I,' in the proper sense of the term; and this occurs by means of free choice and self-determination.[76]

Or, as Novalis states more abruptly: 'God is I'.[77] The individual must then first recognise himself as an individual, a fundamentally rational stance, and then recognise others as individuals, a fundamentally moral one. Fichte's morality is, in many ways, closely related to Kant's categorical imperative, and the community of reason. Yet it is his depiction of reason and morality as finally leading to God that MacDonald draws upon.

In a fragmentary passage at the end of *Paul Faber*, in the dream-vision of a dying man, MacDonald presents a Fichtean view of the final relationship between the self and God:

> I had but one feeling—and that feeling was love—the outgoing of a longing heart towards—I could not tell what;—towards—I cannot describe the feeling—towards the only existence there was, and that was everything;—towards pure being, not as an abstraction, but as the

[73] Novalis, *Fichte Studies*, 165. Italics in original.

[74] Fichte, *System of Ethics*, 164.

[75] Fichte here elaborates Kant's correlation between conscience and faith, where 'Conscience is a consciousness which is of itself a duty'. Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason and Other Writings*, Allen Wood and George di Giovanni (eds) (Cambridge, 1998), 178.

[76] Fichte, *System of Ethics*, 245.

[77] Novalis, *Fichte Studies*, 38.

> one actual fact, whence the world, men, and me – a something I knew only by being myself an existence. It was more me than myself; my very existence was the consciousness of this absolute existence in and through and around me: it made my heart burn, and the burning of my heart was my life – and the burning was the presence of the Absolute.[78]

As in Fichte's *System of Ethics*, this subsumption into the Absolute is only made possible by an earlier realisation of individual consciousness. Paul Faber himself is an unusual figure in MacDonald's fiction, not least because his atheism is not only presented sympathetically but often defended. Wingfold respects Faber both for his 'horror of all kinds of intellectual deception or mistake' – which precludes a belief in God – and for Faber's own respect of the individuality of others.[79] The fulfilment of individual duty is not, for MacDonald, equal to faith in God, but it is both necessary and commendable: 'The doing of things from duty is but a stage on the road to the kingdom of truth and love. Not the less must the stage be journeyed.'[80] Duty is 'the only path to freedom'.[81] Faber's consciousness of duty is arrived at by an act of will; as in Fichte's system, he comes first to consciousness of himself as a reasoning individual, and then proceeds to live out of duty. This is the path taken, albeit in a very different form, by Leopold in *Thomas Wingfold*, who, seized with guilt after his crimes, is brought to the realization of his own freedom. Yet what makes *Faber* remarkable among MacDonald's works is that Faber does not, at the end, achieve any particular religious awakening. He remains an admirable atheist.

Throughout the volume, Wingfold and Faber, who represent what might be called the poles of religion and science, are united in their defence of individual morality against false religion. It is from the curate, not the surgeon, that the strongest argument against religion comes: '"I suspect that worse dishonesty, and greater injustice, are to be found among the champions, lay and cleric, of religious opinion, than in any other class."'[82] Lest the reader think MacDonald is arguing in favour of one particular religious view, almost all forms of Christian belief come under attack: if John Calvin and Jonathan Edwards receive the sharpest scorn, the Church of England and dissenters

[78] MacDonald, *Paul Faber*, 456–7.
[79] Ibid., 6–7.
[80] Ibid., 30.
[81] Ibid., 270.
[82] Ibid., 146.

are also singled out.[83] Instead, scientific rationality is indicated as one of the few ways to Christ left available, for 'Science teaches that a man must not say he knows what he does not know'.[84] The establishment of scepticism and reason as the foundations of belief underlies the entire novel. Belief in Christ is, while still central to MacDonald's theology, here placed as secondary in respect to the self-identification and development of individual consciousness. In an eloquent first-person interjection at the close of the novel, MacDonald suggests without this *a priori* development of rationality, none of his theological ideas can be understood at all:

> But hear me this once more: the God, the Jesus, in whom I believe, are not the God, the Jesus, in whom you fancy I believe: you know them not; your idea of them is not mine … [My words] would bring you life, but the death in him that knoweth and doeth not is strong, in your air they drop and die, winged things no more.[85]

Those readers who read MacDonald's novels expecting a theology which accords with their own notion of Christianity, he warns, will be disappointed: even if the terms are the same, the route to reach them is entirely different, and it is the route that matters. Without consciousness of individual duty, without recognition of individual freedom and will, all knowledge of God is wasted. *Paul Faber* is, in theological terms, MacDonald's angriest and most violent book, a novel in which only Wingfold, the religious sceptic, and Faber, the scientific sceptic, are portrayed with any sympathy. This violence has been picked up on by many critics, and used as an example of MacDonald's sadomasochism. Wolff, who notes that MacDonald regarded *Paul Faber* 'as his best book, a judgment which nobody else is likely to share', focuses only on the novel's sexual politics, both approving of MacDonald's championing of women's rights and condemning what he sees as an obsession with sexual violence.[86] Robert Crawford finds that 'emblems of incest, bestiality and

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[83] MacDonald's scorn for the Church of England may seem surprising, given his conversion around 1865 as part of joining Maurice's church. As he makes clear in an undated letter to his father, however: 'I have no love for *any* sect of Christians as such'. MacDonald, *George MacDonald and his Wife*, 197.

[84] MacDonald, *Paul Faber*, 240.

[85] Ibid., 514.

[86] Wolff, *The Golden Key*, 302. Wolff is here paraphrasing Greville MacDonald, who writes: 'my father once told me he thought [*Paul Faber*] the best of all his novels, although emphatically it is not so'. MacDonald, *George MacDonald and his Wife*, 353.

voyeurism contribute to an often claustrophobically dark eroticism that sits very uneasily with the didactic tone'.[87] Yet to focus on these aspects of the novel is to entirely obscure MacDonald's central argument, which is a rejection of both contemporary and Romantic notions of both selfhood and religion in favour of a return to post-Kantian idealism.

Although mention of specific German thinkers is rare in *Paul Faber*, and completely absent in the third book in the trilogy, *There and Back*, the former volume nevertheless carries a summary of 'Germanism' which in part adequately represents much of MacDonald's late theology:

> The love of the past, the desire of the future, and the enjoyment of the present, make an eternity, in which time is absorbed, its lapse lapses, and man partakes of the immortality of his Maker. In each present personal being, we have the whole past of our generation enclosed, to be re-developed with endless difference in each individuality … Friends, I should be a terror to myself, did I not believe that wherever my dim consciousness may come to itself, God is there.[88]

Although this does not appear particularly relevant to the study of any single German thinker, in its focus on the difference within and between each individual it again presents the notion that all religious belief is based on an act of free choice. Even as the passage ends with the reaffirmation of God's presence, what remains is the terror of knowing that it is only through the individual will that God's presence can be recognised, and thus that it always has the potential not to be the case. *Paul Faber* is the story of that terror, a novel in which belief in God is continually presented as necessary but always also potentially illusory. It is a novel in which only reason matters. Although the novels that follow try to assuage this terror, and in conventional moralistic tones point to the importance of the will of God above all other things, there is nothing of either the fury of *Wingfold* and *Faber* nor the Romantic wonder of the early novels. These late works do maintain a focus on individuality, occasionally even reintegrating the early Romantics, but are never again – with the possible exception of *Lilith*, which is an anomaly in the general decline of

[87] Robert Crawford, *Scotland's Books: The Penguin History of Scottish Literature* (London, 2007), 480. The accusation of bestiality is particularly suspicious. The novel is indeed especially strong in its arguments for animal rights, and an excerpt was reprinted as an anti-vivisection tract, but there is no basis whatsoever to Crawford's claim. Raeper, *George MacDonald*, 175.

[88] MacDonald, *Paul Faber*, 293.

MacDonald's work after 1880—as philosophically coherent as the pre-1880 novels. In *Weighed and Wanting* (1882), the reader is told that: 'in duty, and in duty only, does the individual begin to come into real contact with life; therein only can he see what life is, and grow fit for it'.[89] Five years later, in *Home Again* (1887), however, individual consciousness, and the ability of individual to determine duty, is almost without value: 'God's things come out of his thoughts; our realities are God's thoughts made manifest in things; and out of them our thoughts must come, then the things that come out of our thoughts will be real. Neither our own fancies, nor the judgments of the world, must be the ground of our theories or behaviour.'[90] It is almost as if, having brought doubt and scepticism to the forefront of his work, MacDonald convinced himself more than he desired, and so abandoned any notion of a systematic theology in favour of something far more vague and unconvincing.

In *There and Back* (1891), his late return to Wingfold, however, MacDonald develops one final idea drawn from German thought, that of mediation. Wingfold's appearance in this novel is brief and perhaps unsatisfactory, but in his role as both exemplar and mediator, he presents a final solution to the anxieties raised by *Paul Faber*. The role assigned to Wingfold in this novel can be found in Fichte, where: 'The first rule for spreading morality will therefore be the following: show your fellow human beings things worthy of respect. And we can hardly show them anything better suited to this purpose than our own moral way of thinking and our own moral conduct.'[91] It is particularly in relation to Schleiermacher, and again to Novalis, that the importance of the moral figure as a mediator between the individual and the divine can be seen. For Schleiermacher, religion is the acceptance of 'everything individual as part of the whole', rather than the practice of a particular set of creeds, and is furthermore based in the human, for in order to have religion, 'man must first have found humanity, and he finds it only in love and through love'.[92] Like Fichte, for Schleiermacher religion is found in individual intuition, both at the level of the single human and the community of individuals, but as with Fichte's call for the individual to be a moral exemplar to his peers, simply by demonstrating his own free morality, Schleiermacher notes that the first stage of individual determination is reached through a mediator, a 'leader who awakens his sense for religion from its first slumber and gives him an

[89] George MacDonald, *Weighed and Wanting* (1882; London, [1884?]), 13.
[90] George MacDonald, *Home Again* (London, 1887), 285.
[91] Fichte, *System of Ethics*, 301.
[92] Schleiermacher, *On Religion*, 25, 37–8.

initial direction'.[93] Novalis touches on this point as well, both in his call for 'an intermediary – which connects us to the Godhead', and, to a certain extent, in his political writings, where the monarch serves such a function.[94] Wingfold, who is presented purely as a doubter in the first novel in the trilogy and as an interesting interlocutor in the second, fulfils the role of this intermediary in the final novel. Although the novel is primarily a *bildungsroman*, like *Wilfrid Cumbermede*, concerning the education, inheritance and marriage of Richard Lestrange, Wingfold makes brief appearances in order to impart such enigmatic statements as: "'I must be self-conscious as well as thing-conscious'".[95] It is only through conversations with Wingfold that Richard becomes capable of recognising his own will. Although the theological perspective in *There and Back* is less coherent than in the earlier novels, as the story of Wingfold's growth first into individualism, and then to the role of mediator, it continues to fit the Fichtean paradigm established there. Traces of the mediator can be found throughout MacDonald's fantasy work – the best example being Mr Raven in *Lilith* – but it is only in this trilogy where the reader is told how the exemplar of individual consciousness comes to be such.

There is, in *There and Back*, a second moral exemplar, however. The most important episode in the novel is a reading of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1797), which Richard uses to explore all of his ideas of Nature, God and the self. If not named as often as Novalis, Coleridge is a key influence on MacDonald's work, especially in the later novels, where the reading of Coleridge – as well as the reading of Carlyle – is portrayed as the path to both self-determination and goodness.[96] Coleridge quickly bypasses Fichte in favour of Schelling in *Biographia Literaria*, yet the *a priori* positioning of self-identity as a route to God in Thesis IX still contains echoes of Fichte's *Ethics*: 'philosophy would pass into religion, and religion become inclusive of philosophy. We begin with the I KNOW MYSELF, in order to end with the absolute I AM. We proceed from the self, in order to lose and find all self in GOD.'[97] Like MacDonald, too, Coleridge's concept of the self in his later

[93] Ibid., 50.

[94] Novalis, *Philosophical Writings*, 35.

[95] George MacDonald, *There and Back* (1891; London, [1893?]), 145.

[96] This use of Coleridge, especially focusing on a reading of *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, appears in *David Elginbrod* as well, which novel's discussions of that poem are repeated almost verbatim in *There and Back*, and where Coleridge is held as a 'means of spiritual growth'. MacDonald, *David Elginbrod*, 12.

[97] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria, or Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions*, George Watson (ed.) (London, 1975), 154.

work is based in reason: 'I would raise up my understanding to my reason, and find my Religion in the focus resulting from their convergence'.[98] For both Coleridge and MacDonald, the notion of the individual self is at once central, for it permits the establishment of religious thought, and secondary, for that self is ultimately subsumed in God. Yet the similarity between them is striking: writing sixty years later, MacDonald repeats Coleridge's combination of Romantic and post-Kantian thought: for both writers, an early interest in nature and art gives way to a study of the relation between the self and God. It may be argued that both writers use German terms only to promote their own, far more avowedly Christian, ends. Yet even if that is the case – and the argument above has hopefully indicated that MacDonald, at least, stays closer to Fichte than has previously been acknowledged – it remains notable that their late views in many ways adhere to those of Enlightenment thinkers such as John Locke, for whom, as Charles Taylor argues, 'The Law of Nature is normative … *because* it is God's command'.[99]

MacDonald's thought, as expressed in his English novels, cannot be seen either as representative of Victorian moral sentiment, nor as a naïve appropriation of a particularly Romantic focus on the imagination and fairy tales, as almost all of his critics have argued. Instead, in his work he takes a circuitous route to a complex philosophy of the individual that, while always anchored in German thought, is often surprising in its return to scepticism as the basis of understanding (completing, perhaps, the cycle beginning with Hume's reception in Germany). For MacDonald, 'Of all valueless things, a merely speculative theology is of the most valueless'.[100] Rather than speculate, then, he returns to the self-recognition of the individual and the centrality of free will. For MacDonald, to be an individual means having the power to choose that in which you believe, and as much as his work can be read as an explicitly Christian apologia, what makes his thought distinctive among nineteenth-century Scottish novelists is not the extent of theology in his writings, but his willingness to undercut it at every turn. In this way, MacDonald's theological novels can be seen as creating the space for the rigorous engagement with German philosophy that flourished in Scotland at the end of the nineteenth century.

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[98] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *On the Constitution of the Church and State According to the Idea of Each*, John Barrell (ed.) (London, 1972), 150.

[99] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 235.

[100] MacDonald, *Paul Faber*, 134.