

From Fact to Fantasy in Victorian Fiction: Dickens's *Hard Times* and MacDonald's *Phantastes*

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In an utilitarian age, of all other times, it is a matter of grave importance that Fairy tales should be respected. . . . To preserve them in their usefulness, they must be as much preserved in their simplicity, and purity, and innocent extravagance, as if they were actual fact.

—Dickens, "Frauds on Fairies"

■ Dickens's comments on the fairy tale in the partly satiric essay "Frauds on Fairies" (1853) is an important midcentury manifesto on the importance of the imagination to the Victorians. Dickens's agenda in the essay was at least twofold: he wanted to chastise his colleague Cruikshank, who began bowdlerizing classic fairy tales and retelling them as moral tracts for the young; and he felt the need to defend the fantastic imagination because he saw it as a liberating force in a fact-driven utilitarian age. As he claims in his essay: "It [fairy literature] has greatly helped to keep us, in some sense, ever young, by preserving through our worldly ways one slender track not overgrown with weeds, where we may walk with children sharing their delights" (435).

It is significant that Dickens's next novel after "Frauds on Fairies" is *Hard Times* (1854), often dubbed an industrial novel or anti-utilitarian tract, and certainly the atypical work in his canon. Thematically, *Hard Times* explores the tension between fact and fantasy: Gradgrind's philosophy stresses that "facts alone are wanted in life" (7); the Coketown ethic spurns that which is contrary to fact and productive behavior. Sleary's circus and the Pegasus's Arms, on the other hand, represent the imaginative side of life, the fantasy realm where horses are more than quadrupeds with forty teeth. *Hard Times* can be viewed as Dickens's attempt to integrate his beliefs expressed in "Frauds on Fairies" into his novel: he balances fact with fantasy, commenting on the entire realistic tradition that

privileges fact—realism—over fancy—fairy tale and fantasy. The novel, then, demonstrates Dickens's personal trust in the imagination, shrouded in the guise of a serialized realistic novel. As Harry Stone claims in *Dickens and the Invisible World*, after "Frauds on Fairies" the "fairy tale now stood at the center of his imaginative and social beliefs; it was a shorthand way of referring to and dramatizing those beliefs" (15).

Dickens certainly inspired others. Another contemporary of Dickens would take his lead and carry his ideas even further. George MacDonald, Scottish preacher, essayist, novelist, and fantasist, wrote *Phantastes* (1858) in response to this growing schism between fact and fantasy. In fact, pardon the pun, MacDonald appears to be directly answering *Hard Times*, for in *Phantastes* MacDonald literally transforms fact—the mundane world—into fantasy. He creates a whole fairyland where "truth" resides in the faith in imagination, not in the faith in reason. Whereas the government official tells the fledgling Bitzers that "you don't walk upon flowers in fact; you cannot be allowed to walk upon flowers in carpets" (11), MacDonald seduces the reader to imagine that flowers on carpets are real—that is, they are real in fairyland, in the imagination. As Dickens explored the importance of fantasy through realism, MacDonald explored the nature of reality through fantasy. As Dickens explored the importance of fantasy in the imagination thematically in *Hard Times*, MacDonald explored these concerns thematically and structurally in *Phantastes*.

"Now, what I want is, Facts. . . . Plant nothing else, and root out everything else" (7) begins *Hard Times*. Fact with a capital F. "Louisa, never wonder," orders Mr. Gradgrind to his daughter. "Never wonder. By means of addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division, settle everything somehow, and never wonder" (41), spouts the narrator, mimicking what Mr. M'Choakumchild drills into the young children he teaches. The irony residing behind *Hard Times* is that it is a deadly serious—a factual—work. There is less imaginative play in the novel, less of Dickens's broad stokes of humor and whimsy. It is direct, didactic, and sentimental in places, often mechanical and telegraphic in its construction. Yet this deadly serious realistic novel uses fairy-tale motifs to contrast and complement the thematic focus on the imagination (or lack of imagination). David Lodge equates Dickens's technique in *Hard Times* to Brecht's "alienation effect": "By invoking the world of fairy-tale *ironically*, making the inhabitants of this drab, gritty, Victorian mill town re-enact the motifs of folk-tale and legend, he drew attention to that repression or elimination of the human faculty of imagination . . . which he believed was the culturally disastrous effect of governing society according to purely materialistic, empirical criteria of 'utility'" (45). Thus the realistic novel becomes an ironic commentary on the lack of imagination during the nineteenth century, and it becomes a commentary on the more complex problem of belief—or lack of belief—that was part of the growing industrialized world, which privileged fact over fiction, fact over faith.

In "*Hard Times* and Dickens' Concept of the Imagination," Robert Higbie

persuasively argues that Dickens "is trying to redeem imagination by finding a new way of using it, by giving it a serious purpose so that it will no longer be separate from faith . . . but rather allied with it" (100). To Higbie, "the novel both asks and demonstrates how imagination can survive realism" (107). Of course, *Hard Times*'s pessimistic ending complements such claims, for Dickens the realist and Dickens the social commentator do not want the reader to find the imagination a mere escape from the workaday world; he wants the reader to see what the curtailment of the imagination can lead to. Mr. Gradgrind, Mr. Bounderby, Tom, and Louisa are all tainted by utilitarian fact-bound reasoning. Stephen Blackpool is destroyed because humane actions conflict with factual and practical action; Mr. James Harthouse is a mere shadow of a potentially productive creature. Only Sissy, fruitfully married with children, "grown learned in childish lore," who beautifies "lives of machinery and reality with those of imaginative graces and delights, without which the heart of infancy will wither up" (219), has a satisfactory and productive life. As Higbie suggests, "One must learn that imagination's childlike belief in wish-fulfillment is not enough; one must face the unidealness of reality in order to learn the need for serious belief, chastening oneself into looking for something higher than one's own fancy, giving up the illusion that one can create an ideal oneself as the endings to the earlier novels do" (101). Thus in *Hard Times* Dickens appropriates the imagination to comment on the need for realistic uses of such enchantment: the pathos of the ending is redeemed by Sissy's imaginative and childlike ways. The fairy tale works itself through tragedy to hope, what Tolkien would call *eucatastrophe* (68).

In chapter 2 of *Hard Times* Dickens satirizes utilitarian moral calculus: the government official presiding over the children's class attempts to teach the youngsters that "you must discard the word Fancy altogether" (11). He proves his case with simple logic: since you don't see horses walking up and down your wall, then you don't put horses on wallpaper. Since "you don't walk upon flowers in fact; you cannot be allowed to walk upon flowers in carpets"; thus, you must use "mathematical figures which are susceptible of proof and demonstration. This is the new discovery. This is fact. This is taste" (11). Apparently George MacDonald disliked such a taste, for in chapter 2 of *Phantastes* he appears to answer the government official. In chapter 1, Anodos, the narrator, has been warned by a tiny woman he has discovered in his family bureau that he will eventually find fairyland; in chapter 2 Anodos is careful to describe the metamorphosis into this new realm:

. . . I suddenly, as one awakes to the consciousness that the sea has been moaning by him for hours . . . became aware of the sound of running water near me; and looking out of bed, I saw that a large green marble basin, in which I was wont to wash . . . was overflowing like a spring. . . . And, stranger still, where this carpet, which I myself designed to imitate a field of grass and daises, bordered the course of the little stream,

the grass-blades and daises seemed to wave in a tiny breeze that followed the water's flow; while under the rivulet they bent and swayed with every motion of the change-ful current, as if they were about to dissolve with it, and, forsaking their fixed form, become fluent as the waters. (9)

His dressing table, carved with foliage, also comes to life, as do his curtains, which depict branches and leaves. It seems fairly certain that MacDonald has *Hard Times* in mind as he writes such a scene.¹ The bedroom is an apt metaphor for this transformation: imagination is the act of dreaming, the dream or fantasy world becoming as real and significant as the mundane world of 1858. Flowers can indeed be alive on wallpaper if one is allowed to use imagination. In *Unspoken Sermons* MacDonald writes:

Ask a man of mere science, what is the truth of a flower: he will pull it to pieces, show you its parts, explain how they minister each to the life of the flower . . . and doubtless many more facts about it. Ask the poet what is the truth of a flower, and he will answer: "Why, the flower itself, the perfect flower, and what it cannot help saying to him who has ears to hear it." The truth of the flower is, not the facts about it . . . but the shining, glowing, gladdening, patient thing throned on its stalk—the compeller of smile and tear from child and prophet. (145–46)

Stephen Prickett, in *Romanticism and Religion*, calls the transformation passage in *Phantastes* "a symbolic event" that "suggests that this Fairyland is in some sense to be apprehended as more 'real' than the world in which Anodos had hitherto been brought up" (232). Art or imagination is brought to life, "the imitation is liberated into reality" and the result becomes "the shock of seeing the familiar for the first time" (232). In *Victorian Fantasy* Prickett adds, "What with us is artificial, there [Faerie] is 'natural.' The stream of water overflowing from the basin is literally the River of Life: as it flows across his carpet it brings to life everything it touches" (179–80). MacDonald delivers what Dickens requests—a world where the magical informs the mundane. Or as Anodos explains, "So doth Faerie invade the world of men, and sometimes startle the common eye with an association as of cause and effect, when between the two no connecting links can be traced" (85). The imagination, then, requires faith and belief and becomes the hope and salvation of man. MacDonald performs no fraud on fairies in *Phantastes*.

MacDonald's choice of writing fantasy is important, for he seems to be challenging the very notion of realistic literature that defined the age. C. S. Lewis, the greatest admirer and populizer of MacDonald, writes that MacDonald was "seduced into writing novels," most of which are utterly forgettable, because "a dominant form tends to attract to itself writers whose talents would have fitted them much better for works of some other kind" (232). As editor of *Good Words for the Young*, MacDonald published serially *The Princess and the Goblin*, a work he considered one of his finest. As readership plummeted, MacDonald wrote to

his wife: "Strahan [his publisher] thinks it [lagging readership] is because there is too much of what he calls the fairy element. Perhaps I could find a market for that kind of talent in America—I should wonder" (Greville MacDonald 411-12). Years earlier, George Murray Smith, who had published and liked *Phantastes* and who had just rejected a drama by MacDonald, wrote to him suggesting, "If you would but write novels, you would find all the publishers saving up to buy them of you! Nothing but fiction pays" (Greville MacDonald 317-18). Dickens's popularity defined literary taste, and his brand of realism satiated the reading public; MacDonald, more radical than Dickens in his attempt to remythologize the Victorians, stumbled; his fantasies were too far in fairyland, too far from fact.

When *Phantastes* was published in 1858, the *Athenaeum*, the purveyor of critical taste, contended that MacDonald "seems to have lost all hold of reality." The reviewer called the fantasy "a confusedly furnished second-hand symbol shop" that is "not anchored fast to the earth on which we stand" (580). Equating successful allegory to the "firm grasp of reality," the reviewer argued that *Phantastes* gives "us the shadow without the life. Thus . . . [the book] is a riddle that will not be read" (580). MacDonald, in this reviewer's eyes, paled in comparison to the more stately and conservative Spenser and Bunyan. What MacDonald attempts in the fantasy, however, is much more than allegory; as he wrote in a letter to Mrs. A. J. Scott, "I don't see what right the *Athenaeum* has to call it an allegory and judge or misjudge it accordingly—as if nothing but an allegory could have two meanings!" (Greville MacDonald 297). In a sense, MacDonald intends for his fantasy to wake up the fancy or imagination in the reader, not necessarily to provide a one-to-one correspondence to reality. A woman Anodos meets in fairyland explains, "I should be ill if I did not live on the borders of fairies' country, and now and then eat of their food" (13). Fantasy becomes the food of faith, the tonic from fact. Later in his career, MacDonald wrote "The Fantastic Imagination" in order to explain his theory of the fairy tale. MacDonald believes that "we spoil countless precious things by intellectual greed" (322) and that "the greatest forces lie in the region of the uncomprehended" (319). Thus, MacDonald could meld fantasy with belief in a higher power—God—with the purpose of a fairy tale being to "wake things up that are in him [the reader]" and to "make him think things for himself" (319). This anti-rational—or anti-intellectual—discussion by MacDonald aligns him with Dickens: we must preserve our childlike freedom and imagination. McDonald's most concrete definition of a fairy tale is highly emotional and geared toward the reader's personal—and innocent—response: "A fairytale, a sonata, a gathering storm, a limitless night, seizes you and sweeps you away: do you begin at once to wrestle with it and ask whence its power over you, whither it is carrying you?" (319).

If Dickens and MacDonald agreed on the importance of fantasy and fairy tale, it is MacDonald who ultimately—and radically—integrated theory into practice. As we have seen, Dickens used fairy-tale motifs as an ironic commentary

on the fact-based structure of Coketown. MacDonald, on the other hand, left realism behind after two paragraphs in *Phantastes*, breaking from realistic conventions. The epigraphs at the beginning of the fantasy define its strategies. MacDonald's work begins with various quotations from his master, Novalis: "In fairy-story is that world which is opposed throughout to the world of rational truth, and precisely for that reason it is so thoroughly an analogue to it, as Chaos is an analogue to the finished Creation." To Novalis, "One can imagine stories without rational cohesion and yet filled with associations, like dreams; and poems that are mere lovely sounding . . . but also without rational sense and connections . . ." (3). *Phantastes* follows this pattern: Anodos, in his first-person bildungsroman, wanders through fairyland encountering a world "full of oddities and all sorts of incredibly ridiculous things, which a man is compelled to meet and treat as real existence, although all the time he feels foolish for doing so" (173). Yet the chaotic nature of the text mirrors the overall thesis of the fantasy, that the world is comprehensible only through the imagination and faith.

Anodos is returned to the real world at the end of the fantasy, awaiting passage once again to fairyland, now a metaphor for death and a new beginning. Melancholy is balanced by the understanding that a higher reality awaits Anodos, MacDonald, and the reader. Fantasy becomes an alternative religion for MacDonald; in fantasy one finds the belief in God. Higbie argues that Dickens used imagination in *Hard Times* to underscore that "imagination and faith are both necessary, acting together to defeat unbelief. Thus imagination can help lead to something like spiritual salvation" (103). Anodos writes at the end of his narrative: "Yet I know that good is coming to me—that good is always coming; though few have at all times the simplicity and the courage to believe it. What we call evil, is the only and best shape, which, for the person and his condition at the time, could be assumed by the best good. And so, *Farewell*" (185). Dickens ends *Hard Times* with: "Dear reader! It rests with you and me, whether, in our two fields of action, similar things shall be or not. Let them be! We shall sit with lighter bosoms on the hearth, to see the ashes of our fires turn grey and cold" (219). To Dickens and MacDonald faith conquers all—and faith in the imagination leads to this ultimate belief.

Dickens wrote "Frauds on Fairies" to condemn the rationalizing of imaginative literature, and though Dickens would venture into the world of fantasy—especially in his ghost stories—he always had a solid footing in reality, for his bread-and-butter was the realistic novel. He would only leave this world for a short time, always returning to the hard times of the nineteenth century. MacDonald, however, was able to suspend his disbelief more radically than Dickens; in *Phantastes* he could achieve thematically and structurally what Dickens would only hint at in his major novels. "Fairyland lay before me, and drew me towards it with an irresistible attraction" (54), says Anodos, symbolizing MacDonald's belief in the power of the imagination. Tempted by the fairies, MacDonald

relinquished his hold on fact in order to find a much higher truth in the apparent chaos of fantasy. Anodos tells us how we are to read such fantasy: "But it is no use trying to account for things in Fairyland; and one who travels there soon learns to forget the very idea of doing so, and takes everything as it comes; like a child, who, being in a chronic condition of wonder, is surprised at nothing" (24). Dickens would have liked Anodos.

Note

1. In *The Golden Key* Robert Lee Wolff includes a picture entitled "MacDonald with a Group of Contemporary Writers," which is originally printed in Greville MacDonald's *George MacDonald and His Wife*. Thackeray, Macaulay, Bulwer Lytton, Carlyle, Dickens, Froude, Collins, Trollope, and MacDonald are pictured. Though the photograph is obviously a composite, it does indicate that MacDonald was part of the literary circle of the day. Wolff posits that "Dickens is said to have praised *Phantastes*" (5), but in a note he admits that he cannot find a reference to the book in Dickens's letters. Michael Kotzin suggests that Dickens may have read *Phantastes*, but he too is unable to substantiate such a claim. H. Crago contends that Dickens did indeed influence MacDonald, concluding that "MacDonald certainly found Dickens' use of the fantastic one of his great resources, and in adapting and extending certain symbolic elements sometimes produced conceptions that are in many ways worthy of the greatness of their inspirer" (90). Crago sees *Little Dorrit* as an influence on *Phantastes*. It seems safe to say, consequently, that MacDonald did read Dickens, particularly "Frauds on Fairies" and *Hard Times*.

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