
Mise En Abyme and the Ontological Uncertainty of Magical Events in *At the Back of the North Wind*

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George MacDonald's novel *At the Back of the North Wind* tells the story of a boy's magical journey with a mysterious figure, the North Wind, who reveals to the boy his spiritual life. This novel has been categorised as fantasy, in spite of the fact that it 'has a very real setting... which is London sometime during the middle of the nineteenth century' (Reis 1972, p.82). Simply defined, fantasy is a story in which magical events actually take place in the story world, while they are unlikely to happen in reality, in contrast to realistic stories in which 'everything... must conform to our sensory experience of the real world' (Attebery 2004, pp.295-296).

In this paper, I am going to argue that the magical events in the story are not 'real' as they seem. They cannot be considered to actually take place in the story world, because their existence has the nature of ontological uncertainty. By 'ontological uncertainty,' I mean that the magical events oscillate between factual happenings and the main character's fancies. I will argue that this phenomenon is inherent in the narrative structure of MacDonald's novel and particularly in its deployment of *mise en abyme*, namely the mirror in the text: it is a kind of narrative structure, which 'invites interpretation of a small part of a narrative as a focused representation of the whole in which it appears' (Keen 2003, p.112).

Dällenback emphasises that the mutual reflexivity between narrative form and its content is the typical property of *mise en abyme*, which reflects narrative 'by taking as its own theme the duplication... this mirror of a mirror was bound, thematically, to call up other mirrors, creating multiple, infinite reflexions' (Dällenback 1989, p.59). I will show that in *At the Back of the North Wind* the relation between the novel's narrative form and content is maintained in this reflexive fashion. The narrative conveys the notion that the child protagonist Diamond's successive magical adventures with North Wind represent North Wind's relation to the child. The relation between North Wind and Diamond mirrors the child's relation to the narrator of the story, which is also conveyed by the narrative. The relations among North Wind, Diamond, and the narrator are embedded within each other through narrative. In effect, this strategy blurs the ontological boundaries between

these components to such a degree that the notion of uncertainty is exposed.

In this novel, the story of magical events has three overlapped sources. The first is the main child character, whose magical journey is the focus of the primary story; the second is the narrator, who reveals the child to be the source of his retelling of adventures; the third one is the complex relation between the child character and the narrator, which overturns the primary and secondary positions they occupy respectively in story-telling. The child Diamond maintains a complex narrative relation with the narrative, which produces the magical events as something between factual happenings and fancy. Their relationship involves interpretations and perceptions of what might have happened in the story world according to the two parties, and further enforces the ontological uncertainty of the magical events. In other words, the magical events are in part an epistemological product. As the relationship between the child character and the narrator is crucial, I shall take a discussion of this relationship as the point of departure.

The story is not been told in the first person. It is presented as the narrator's second-hand retelling of the child Diamond's adventures. As the story is approaching its end, the narrator concedes to us that as a tutor of a rich family, he meets Diamond, who is the page of the family. The narrator tells us: 'I gained so much of [Diamond's] confidence that he told me all I have told you' (MacDonald 1994, p.358). In telling Diamond's story, the narrator faces some difficulties arising from Diamond's incapacity at giving details. For example, when the narrator is about to tell Diamond's adventure in the country 'At the Back of the North Wind', he says, 'I have now come to the most difficult part of my story' (p.119). This is because the narrator knows 'nothing about the story except Diamond had told it' and 'because when Diamond came back, he had forgotten a great deal, and what he did remember was very hard to tell' (p.119). U.C. Knoepfmacher points out that the narrator 'delights in Diamond's many misperceptions and stresses the child's difficulties in articulating, let alone interpreting, the meanings' of his adventures (Knoepfmacher 1998, p.232). The narrator has simply accepted what Diamond tells about his adventures with North Wind, as he claims:

‘If I could not regard it all in exactly the same light as he did, I was... fully sympathetic, and he was satisfied without demanding of me any theory of difficult points involved’ (p.367). As the narrator ‘does not at all feel superior to this slightly addled little boy’ (Knoepfmacher 1998, p.232), what he does is to fill the gaps in Diamond’s telling while keeping the interpretation open. In this respect, the narrator simply presents the child as he is, in relation to the story: the source of story.

With the notion in mind that the narrator recounts faithfully Diamond’s story, we can direct our attention to the roles that Diamond plays in relation to his story, which has to do with the plausible occurrence of magical events. Diamond is not only the source of his story, but also its main character. The dual roles lend credence to the magical adventures, while their authenticity is under threat after a close look at the way that events are represented. This can be illustrated in the episode of Diamond’s first encounter with North Wind at night (and many that follow). From the story we learn that Diamond is woken up by North Wind at night and enticed to walk on the lawn outside. Later, he is found by Mrs Crump who believes him to be sleepwalking and carries him back to his mother, who puts him back to bed to sleep, but they are afraid of frightening him at his own sleepwalking and say nothing. Diamond wakes up next morning, and at first he believes that it was a dream. ‘But the memory grew brighter and brighter in his head, until it didn’t look altogether like a dream’ (p.33). Then he decides, ‘if he had really been brought home to his mother by Mrs Crump, she would say something to him about it and that would settle the matter’ p.33). But, as the narrative reads, his mother, ‘afraid of frightening him at his own sleepwalking...said nothing about last night’ (p.35). Seeing that the adults behave normally toward him and say nothing about last night, he concludes that the episode is a dream.

This episode is retold by the narrator as a story, but there is no doubt that Diamond is the person who experiences the night event first-hand and tells the narrator the story from his present point of view. Despite the story’s third-person narration, the story is essentially self-narration. Cohn says that self-narration involves the hero’s experiencing and narrating selves and that ‘the experiencing self... is always

viewed by’ the narrating self ‘who knows what happened to him next’ (Cohn 1983, p.145). In other words, the relation between the Diamond’s dual roles is the backbone of the narrative structure itself.

While Diamond considers the night encounter with North Wind as a dream, the event comes to us in a real-life fashion as if it is a real happening. It is generally noted that narrative is a representation of a series of events even if they look altogether real. When a narrative frames the events as something real, the degree of trustworthiness of the narrated events remains unknown. In this episode, the reference that Diamond uses to frame the event to be a dream is the silence of adults. This is a rather curious strategy, because the knowing adults are part of the night event. Diamond’s confidence in its referential effect is premised on a paradoxical presumption that what happened in the previous night was *true*. That is, he believes that adults *appearing* last night know best. In this way, when determining the night event to be a dream, Diamond has unwittingly discredited his own speculation.

As the Diamond narrating self speculates on his own night experience, his act to achieve the speculative end is an act of self-reference. According to Prince, a narrative that refers to or comments on its own other passage has a metalinguistic function (Prince, 1995, p.58). In this novel, while the self-referential act of the narrative reflects on the event, its metalinguistic function calls into question the event’s ontological status. As a result, our judgment is suspended as to whether the event is the product of fancy or a factual occurrence.

According to Dällenback, reflexivity and ‘the self-reference of the narration’ (Dällenback 1989, p.92) are among characteristics of *mise en abyme* narrative. In *At the Back of the North Wind*, the narration explicitly or implicitly refers to its own passages from time to time. Self-referential narrative signals reflexivity and sheds a different light on story scenes. Consequently, the status of the magical events alternates between dream and reality. For example, in the stormy night Diamond goes out with North Wind, who aims to sink a ship in the ocean. Later she leaves Diamond in a cathedral, where he falls asleep when listening to the apostles talking. Then the narrative

continues: 'that Diamond has fallen fast asleep is very evident from the strange things he now fancied as taking place' (p.94). This statement reiterates the ground for magical events to happen: the magical events take place only when Diamond is sleeping and dreaming. Like a mirror, this statement repeats what the North Wind says to Diamond before their night out: 'Only you must go to bed first. I can't take you till you're in bed. That's the law about the children. So I had better go and do something else first' (p.68). Then, obediently, Diamond 'was soon fast asleep. He woke in the middle of the night and the darkness.' (p.72) These words suggest that Diamond dreams of his night adventure, but he experiences it as if it is carried out in a real-life fashion.

Dällenback says that in *mise en abyme* 'a reflexive utterance only becomes such through the duplicative relationship it admits to with one or other aspect of the narrative' (Dällenback 1989, p.44). The narrative interpretation of Diamond's adventure in the cathedral neatly copies the North Wind's speech, which is also the object of narration. Equally, another statement that North Wind makes after Diamond's stormy night adventure has the same effect of self-reference, which reflects on what happens. In the cathedral, Diamond hears the apostle speaking ill of North Wind. No sooner has he cried aloud in protest than he finds himself awake in his bed in the barn. Afterwards, Diamond questions North Wind: 'Why didn't you come back for me in the church that night?' North Wind replies, 'I did. I carried you safe home. All the time you were dreaming about the glass apostles, you were lying in my arms.' (p.104). Here, North Wind's statement tells us that Diamond dreams of the scene in which he is left alone in the cathedral, where he further sleeps and dreams of the apostles' conversation. This complicates the ontological mode of Diamond's stormy night adventure as a mere dream.

While North Wind is one of the sources of embedded reference, which encourage the intertwining state of dream and reality, she is also one of the objects of narration. Thus, she owes her existence to the narrative that Diamond and the narrator formulate together. Integral to the magical events, which are possibly Diamond's imagining, North Wind and her relation to Diamond would be the little boy's mental product, which expresses his character. The

following conversation between Diamond and North Wind offers evidence. Diamond has been afraid that he is 'only dreaming' of his adventures with North Wind and that she is 'nowhere at all' (p.374). North Wind replies: 'I think...that if I were only a dream, you would not have been able to love me so. You love me when you are not with me, don't you?' (p.376) North Wind's reply gives an ambiguous explanation of her existence: she could have a material existence, but she still could exist in an affective ground even if she is actually not there. Then, it dawns on Diamond that North Wind simply exists there as she does, as he exclaims, without further philosophical investigation into the complex relation between materialism and idealism: 'I see! I see! How could I be able to love you as I do if you weren't there at all, you know? Besides, I couldn't be able to dream anything half so beautiful out of my own head; or if I did, I couldn't love a fancy of my own like that, could I?' (p.376) In reply to Diamond, North Wind answers: 'I think not. You might have loved me in a dream... but not loved me like a real being as you love me. Even then, I don't think you could dream anything that hadn't something real like it somewhere' (p.377). North Wind goes on to indicate that her 'real' image is conditional, 'I don't think I am just what you fancy me to be. I have to shape myself various ways to various people.' (p.377)

The last two quoted replies of North Wind in the previous paragraph communicate that her various manifestations presented to different people constitute an epistemological effect. Whoever or whatever 'she' is, she exists as 'North Wind' to Diamond and has been presented as such in his narrative. Above all, the dialogue between Diamond and his North Wind suggests that North Wind originates from Diamond's mind. If North Wind is part of Diamond's mind, the relation between them is in essence Diamond's relation to his self. North Wind has always been part of his self, who inspires him and speaks what he might have in his own mind. Needless to say, Diamond's relation to North Wind amounts to a mirror, which reflects his own image.

Diamond's adventures with North Wind emblemise aspects of his personality (what he is). She 'exists' in tandem with Diamond in their adventures, without which Diamond cannot be who he 'is' in the story. The climax of the story is Diamond's visit to the country 'At the Back

of the North Wind', which, we now understand, speaks of Diamond's own essence. Thus, it is not surprising that Diamond acts in the role of North Wind after this trip; Wood has observed that 'Once Diamond has been to the back of the north wind himself...he no longer asks inconvenient questions and in fact begins to respond in North Wind's manner to the questioning people around him' (Wood, 1993, p.114).

Diamond has maintained a relation to his seeming other, North Wind, which is in essence his relation to his self. To say that Diamond's relation to North Wind is a relation to his self is to say that the narrative of the novel is an aesthetic form of Diamond's relation to his self. One might wish to say that this narrative mode from which Diamond's subject emerges as a moral being corresponds to Foucault's concept of 'ethical subject'. When elaborating the constitution of 'ethical subject' as one's relation with one's self, Foucault says, 'it was a generally accepted principle that one could not attend to oneself without the help of another' (Foucault 2000a, p.97) because the human subject emerges from interactions with other people bearing social discourses. This equally applies to the narrative that describes Diamond's interpersonal relations to many of his social others after his visit to 'At the Back of the North Wind'. As Makman notes, the visit to the country 'is the last in a series of scenes in which Diamond's peculiar gentleness and awesome truthfulness astonish adults in the narrative, attract them to him, and alter their behaviour' (Makman 1999, p.126).

While ontological uncertainty is integral to Diamond's adventure with North Wind through the narrative, he equally exists within the 'interconnection between fantasy and reality' (McGillis 1992, p.153). The third-person narrator partly contributes to Diamond's existential composition. As has been said in the beginning of this paper, the narrator of the novel claims to recount faithfully what Diamond has said, and many of Diamond's thoughts are presented in direct speech, which indicates the lowest degree of the narrator's manipulation. Nevertheless, the narrator admits his involvement in constructing Diamond as he 'is' in the story. As he says, 'I do not mean that he thought these very words. They are perhaps too grown-up for him to have thought, but they represent the kind of

thing that was in his heart and his head' (pp.157-58). It is noted that the story of Diamond's magical adventures is a representation of his spiritual life and ethical personality. Diamond cannot be presented as a moral child without the narrator's involvement. In discussing ethical issues in narrative representation, Gibson has noted, 'narration might seem principally to be a mode of activity in which a subject takes another, others, the world as the object or objects of knowledge and claims possession of them' (Gibson 1999, p.26). In this sense, the child Diamond can be considered as an object, which is passively represented by the narrator, who assumes the role of interpreting subject. But, with Diamond as the first-hand story teller and with the narrator as both his story listener and re-teller, the story actually contains both of them as double narrating agents. Diamond and the narrator maintain a mutual relation with one another through story-telling. Foucault has said of story writing as both a teller's relation with himself and reciprocal communication between the teller and listener:

To write is... to 'show oneself, 'to project oneself into view, to make one's own face appear in the other's presence. And by this it should be understood that the letter is both a gaze that one focuses on the addressee ... and a way of offering oneself to his gaze by what one tells him about oneself.
(Foucault, 2000b, p.216)

Therefore, although Diamond could be considered an object of narration, he can be seen to speak himself out through this mutual relation. It is through the act of story-telling as a mutual relation that the narrator experiences change within him, like many of Diamond's social others, as he reflects: 'the whole ways and looks of the child... took hold of my heart, and I felt myself wonderfully drawn towards him ... A gush of reverence came over me' (p.358). In this way, the self of the narrator is equally being mirrored, modified and reproduced in a deep sense during the narrative progression.

The mutual relation between Diamond and narrator is maintained by the narrative, which establishes the relation between Diamond and his North Wind in a reciprocal sense. On a close look, North Wind is to Diamond as Diamond is to the narrator. Knoepfelmacher has observed that 'the narrator's deferential relation to Diamond... mirrors Diamond's own

awed relation to North Wind' (Knoepfmacher 1998, p.233). The relations between the narrator, Diamond, and the North Wind suggest that the narrative of this novel takes the form of *mise en abyme* as a whole.

In the narrative dealing with Diamond's adventures, there are other characters, the girl Nanny and Mr. Raymond for example, who give accounts of their dream encounters and stories. The occurrence of stories within stories is typical of *mise en abyme*. As they are within the narrative that reconstructs Diamond's telling, their narrative level is, to use Genette's term, 'metadiegetic' (Genette 1983, p.228). In this way, they are presented through the primary narrative, 'from the narrational control of' which 'they do not aim to liberate themselves' (Dällenback 1989, p.51). In this novel, characters' utterances and actions are represented by narration, whose act of narrating is reflected in its representational products. It would not be easy to tell the narrating subjects from the narrated objects through the reflexive narrative as its only agent. The truth of ontological status of the events is lost in the abyss.

Generally speaking, the act of story telling relies on mental processes which return to the past and examine it. Dällenback reminds us that: 'We should note first of all that the reflexive work of art is a representation, and one with great internal cohesion. Given its figurative nature, it is suited to the fictional *mise en abyme*, which aims, by analogy, to relate series of events to each other' (Dällenback 1989, p.71).

With a gesture of retrospection, the narrative of George MacDonald's novel *At the Back of the North Wind* resonates with a reflexive form paralleling this narrative act. As Robb says, 'At one point, he compares memory to a mirror: both are agents of 'reflection', just like thought itself. MacDonald clearly associates mirror/memory/thought together as a means whereby everyday reality is reproduced yet subtly altered as to give pleasure' (Robb 1988, p.282).

In conclusion, the narrative form of George MacDonald's novel *At the Back of the North Wind* reflects its own contents, which are in turn produced through the mirroring narrative act. The narrative has a layering structure featuring 'the mirror in the text,' in which the ontological uncertainty of magical events is inherent.

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