

Use of Somnambulism in George MacDonald's *David Elginbrod*

Midori Kihara (木原 翠)

Five years after *Phantastes* (1858), George MacDonald published a novel, *David Elginbrod* (1863). Although *Phantastes* and *Lilith* (1895) are usually seen as the major MacDonald texts since they are entirely written in standard English and have unique visionary quality, it is worth paying more attention to some of the neglected semi-realist ones, as they share similar themes and characterizations with the better-known works. *David Elginbrod* is considered his first attempt at a long realistic novel, one of the most dominant styles in the mid-Victorian period. MacDonald started his writing career as a poet with a narrative poem *Within and Without* (1855), but he later turned to the novel in order to meet the commercial demands of the mid-Victorian literary market. *David Elginbrod* is also categorised as MacDonald's first Scottish novel in which he abundantly uses a North-Eastern Scottish dialect in the first section 'Turriepuffit', within a distinctively a Scottish country setting. However, the narrative form of *David Elginbrod* is peculiar, with a combination of Kailyardism (depicting a peaceful Scottish country life), gothic, and mystery elements.¹ One of the most important motifs which sustains interest in the novel is 'somnambulism', which afflicts the anti-heroine, Euphrasia Cameron (Euphra), who appears in the second section 'Arnstead', set in England, and seduces the protagonist Hugh Sutherland. *OED* defines 'somnambulism' as 'the fact or habit of walking about and performing other actions while asleep; sleep-walking', and one derivative is 'somnambulation'. Nouns which mean a person who walks when sleeping are 'somnambulist', 'somnambular', or 'somnambule'. This paper will examine the functions of this intriguing motif which recurs throughout MacDonald's works and has a particularly dramatic presence in *David Elginbrod*.

William Raeper briefly points out that somnambulism is 'a component of sensation novel motifs' (404) and that 'both Lady Alice in *The Portent* and

Euphrasia Cameron are afflicted with the same condition' (404). In what ways is it a sensation novel motif? Lady Alice's somnambulism in MacDonald's other novel, *The Portent* (1864), provides the basis for an inheritance plot in which, like in Collins' *The Woman in White*, she loses her privileged status because she is unfairly judged as too intellectually weak and odd a character to deserve to become heiress to the property. On the other hand, Euphrasia Cameron's somnambulism in *David Elginbrod* allows her, though unwittingly, to steal valuable rings from the protagonist's, Hugh Sutherland's, private room and thus makes her commit a domestic crime.

As can be observed, somnambulism reflects mental problems with the female characters. While Lady Alice's sleepwalking habit arises from her intellectual peculiarity and anxiety, which themselves stem from her unstable, solitary position in the household, Euphrasia Cameron is favoured by her uncle, the lord of the house in Arnstead, Surrey, and is responsible for teaching her cousin before the new tutor, Hugh Sutherland, takes over her position. Euphrasia's somnambulism seems to be attributed to something else: perhaps her haughtiness, which is a sign of inner weakness, and her corporeal frailty in flirting with men solely out of her self-love. Euphrasia bewitches Sutherland, hiding her secret lover, Von Funkelstein, a wicked Bohemian, whom she has met a few years earlier than Hugh. Since she yields to the villain, he seduces and ill-uses her for his evil purposes. He exercises a mesmeric power in attracting her, which triggers her dormant disposition toward sleepwalking. In Cosmo's story in *Phantastes* (Chapter 13), the lady in white who appears in the mirror every night is also depicted as if she is sleepwalking ('the lady moved, and without opening her eyes, rose, and passed from the room with the gait of a somnambulist') (168), and the same mechanism is at work behind her nocturnal sauntering. It is implied that the lady is manipulated by an evil witch who had sold her the mirror in an antique shop and is spiritually trapped by a man of similarly dubious nature.² In *Lilith*, the eponymous female character (Adam's first wife) could also be seen metaphorically in a sleepwalking state, affected by the shadow, a ubiquitous black being which is the source of dark spots on a leopardess, Lilith's double. The sinister men in the earlier novels are sublimed into metaphysical existence in the forms of a shadow which seems to control Lilith's mind. It is implied that this is masculine ('he was a shadow; he had no thick to him!' [267]), and right before Lilith kills her daughter Lona,

‘attended her walks, but, self-occupied, him she did not see’ (261).

In terms of plot, somnambulism also contributes to the supernatural thrill in *David Elginbrod*. Sleepwalking Euphrasia is perceived as her ancestor’s ghost on the night when Sutherland wagers with Funkelstein and tests his courage in the ‘haunted chamber’. Previously, Sutherland had heard a rumour about a spectre, ‘a figure, dressed exactly like the picture of Lady Euphrasia [Euphrasia’s ancestor], wandering up and down, wringing her hands and beating her breast, as if she were in terrible trouble’, with ‘the face of a corpse, with pale-green spots’ (257). In the chamber on the night of the wager, Sutherland is awoken by a chilling sense that he is not alone in the room, and then sees the face of a spectre corresponding to the description of Lady Euphrasia’s ghost looking as if it had stepped from the frame of her portrait (265). Later in the story, the spectral figure turns out to be Euphrasia herself by her own confession (300) as well as in Hugh’s consultation with Robert Falconer, a detective-like figure in London (378). The narrator describes her feet as ‘bare, as the feet of the dead ought to be, which are about to tread softly in the realm of Hades’ (265) and yet ‘exquisite’ (266). Euphrasia has ‘the desire that the beauty of her feet should have its full power, from being rarely seen’ (275). So her feet are clearly the representation of her physicality and vanity.³ Euphrasia, disguised as the ghost, ‘dragged one limb after the other slowly and, to appearance, painfully’ (264), prefiguring the injury of her foot in an accident occurring soon after.

Euphrasia’s eventual recovery from sleepwalking comes at the cost of a serious wound to her foot. Although she is in bed with illness because of the fatigue caused by her nocturnal walk, she joins the drive with Hugh, and as a result of her carelessness and weakness, her foot slips from a carriage step and she falls with a cry of agony. Hugh finds that this accident greatly changes her appearance in a fortnight’s time: ‘She lay before him wasted and wan; her eyes twice their former size, but with half their former light; her fingers long and transparent; and her voice low and feeble’ (284). She still suffers from the villain’s mesmeric interference with her mind, and Hugh sees: ‘At length—horrible, far more horrible to him than the vision of the ghost—Euphra crept passed him, appearing in the darkness to crawl along the wall against which she supported herself, and scarcely suppressing her groans of pain’ (286). Later, Hugh realizes that she creeps from her chamber at night at the cost of great

suffering and risk to her life to meet Funkelstein in the wood. Because of this, 'all the summer growths of his love were chilled by an absolute frost of death. A kind of annihilation sank upon the image of Euphra' (289). As if Euphrasia knows what is happening in his mind, she 'made no attempts to fascinate him, and never avoided his look when it chanced to meet hers' (295). Her vanity and pride are diminished only after she is dispirited by the serious injury. She confesses to Hugh that she is a somnambulist (300) and that Funkelstein had her cast into a deep sleep and sent for the rings (301), while her confession and lack of affectation allow her to have an honest and true relationship with Hugh.

After Hugh leaves for London to seek the stolen rings and get a new job, Euphrasia's self-reflection is further deepened when she is left in solitude in the house in Arnstead. It is true that Euphrasia finally dies, as the fallen women in the sensation novels are customarily expunged from the text for their sins, but MacDonald seems not so much interested in punishment for previous wrong-doing. Instead he tries to portray the psychological transformation of an apparently morally corrupt female character. Euphrasia's somnambulation resumes several weeks later, but this time she is supported by Margaret Elginbrod, the saintly daughter of David Elginbrod, who is Hugh's spiritual counselor, living far away in the north of Scotland. Margaret, working as a maid in the house, helps Euphrasia restrain her desire to react to the villain, and finally the latter succeeds in resisting him. Margaret sees :

Euphra on her knees at the foot of the bed, an old-fashioned four-post one. She had her arms twined round one of the bed posts, and her head thrown back, as if some one were pulling her backwards by the hair, which fell over her night-dress to the floor in thick, black masses. Her eyes were closed; her face was death-like, almost livid; and the cold dews of torture were rolling down from brow to chin. Her lips were moving convulsively, with now and then the appearance of an attempt at articulation, as if they were set in motion by an agony of inward prayer.

[...] Next her arms untwined themselves from the bedpost, and her hands clasped themselves together. She looked like one praying in the intense silence of absorbing devotion. (417, 18)

Euphrasia smiles 'a most child-like, peaceful, happy smile' and tells Margaret

that she has been helped by God. Margaret observes a dramatic change in Euphrasia: ‘At that moment the moon shone out full, and her face appeared in its light like the face of an angel. Margaret looked on her with awe. Fear, distress, and doubt had vanished, and she was already beautiful like the blessed’(418). Euphrasia’s name is taken from a passage in *Paradise Lost*: ‘then purged with euphrasy and rue/ The visual nerve, for he had much to see’ (Milton 590, Book XI, lines 414-415), which MacDonald quotes for the epigraph of chapter 55 in *David Elginbrod* (105). According to a note to *Paradise Lost*, ‘euphrasy’ is ‘eyebright, a herb used in poultices for the eyes’ and ‘rue’ is also ‘said to improve eyesight’ (917). The term ‘euphrasy’ may evoke ‘euphoria’ (intense happiness), and in that case it would sound ironical, considering Euphrasia’s fate to die as the result of her injury. On the other hand, ‘euphrasy’ as something to purge or heal also suggests Euphrasia’s spiritual transformation, which is achieved toward the end of the story.

Thus, Euphrasia’s appearance changes, but at the same time it is intriguing that her psychology recovering from somnambulism is associated with having ‘two lives.’ Her state of mind is unified through hardship, unlike the disrupted, guilt-ridden soul of the sleepwalking Lady Macbeth. The following passage about Euphrasia is worth noting:

she would no more lead two lives, the waking and the sleeping. Her waking will and conscience had asserted themselves in her sleeping acts; and the memory of the somnambulist lived still in the waking woman. Hence her two lives were blended into one life; and she was no more two, but one. This indicated a mighty growth of individual being. (419)

A similar analysis of the mind can be found in *The Portent*, when Lady Alice is sleepwalking: ‘In something deeper than sleep she lay, and yet not in death [...] In what far realms of life might the lovely soul be straying! What mysterious modes of being might now be the homely surroundings of her second life!’(61) Euphrasia’s somnambulation and Alice’s are different, as the former’s is a false mental state tainted by the necromantic power of Funkelstein, whereas the latter’s sleepwalking in a ‘second life’ connotes the world beyond death, one of eternal spring.

MacDonald himself may not have realized what exactly the somnambulars’

experiences signify, but it is interesting to see how the somnambulism motif recurs in his works. It could be suggested that somnambulism anticipates the textual structure of *Lilith* (1895), in which the protagonist Vane wanders between two worlds which are not clearly demarcated and which cohabit with each other. At the end of the penultimate chapter of *Lilith*, Vane realizes that he returns to reality out of a long dream vision:

My heart beating with hope and desire, I held faster the hand of my Lona, and we began to climb; but soon we let each other go, to use hands as well as feet in the toilsome ascent of the huge stones. At length we drew near the cloud, which hung down the steps like the borders of a garment, passed through the fringe, and entered the deep folds. A hand, warm and strong, laid hold of mine, and drew me to a little door with a golden lock. The door opened; the hand let mine go, and pushed me gently through. I turned quickly, and saw the board of a large book in the act of closing behind me. I stood alone in my library. (356)

Vane's consciousness returns to his original world when he suddenly finds he is in his library, as if he has been half dreaming while he is standing there. Further, the novel closes with the following passage:

Now and then, when I look round on my books, they seem to waver as if a wind rippled their solid mass, and another world were about to break through. Sometimes when I am abroad, a like thing takes place; the heavens and the earth, the trees and the grass appear for a moment to shake as if about to pass away; then, lo, they have settled again into the old familiar face! At times I seem to hear whisperings around me, as if some that loved me were talking of me; but when I would distinguish the words, they cease, and all is very still. I know not whether these things rise in my brain, or enter it from without. I do not seek them; they come, and I let them go.

Strange dim memories, which will not abide identification, often, through misty windows of the past, look out upon me in the broad daylight, but I never dream now. It may be notwithstanding, that when most awake, I am only dreaming the more! But when I wake at last into

that life which, as a mother her child, carries this life in its bosom, I shall know that I wake, and shall doubt no more.

I wait; asleep or awake, I wait.

Novalis says, 'Our life is no dream, but it should and will perhaps become one.' (358-359)

MacDonald's fundamental idea here in the above passages is that human world is only dreamed by God, and people are sleepwalking on the earth, or 'wake-sleeping', since Vane's original world is, in the phrase of Raven who guides him into the other world, 'a half-baked sort of place' (19). Both Vane and Euphrasia in *David Elginbrod* have immature souls which need an awakening. The idea of two worlds is already seen in *Phantastes* in which the protagonist Anodos wanders in a dreamland, but the semi-realist novels (*David Elginbrod* and *The Portent*) carry on the idea of two realms and spiritual transformation in the somnambulism motifs and prepare the structural principle of transition between alternative worlds in *Lilith*.

Notes

1 In a recent study, Elizabeth Andrews demonstrates that MacDonald's 'deft usage of tropes common to sensation fiction' in *David Elginbrod* 'achieves a narrative result more closely fitting the didacticism exemplified by novels generally classified as religious fiction', in order to show the similarities between the different genres (157).

2 Robert Lee Wolff concisely writes: 'Reverting to the Hoffmannesque theme which he [MacDonald] had used in the story of Cosmo in *Phantastes* and in *The Portent*, MacDonald makes Euphra a somnambule, mesmerised by a wicked villain named Funkelstein, who embraces her as he pleases when he has put her into a trance' (198).

3 Andrews argues that MacDonald uses the 'emphasis on Euphra's delicate ankles and feet to underscore the economic and social division between the two women [Euphra and the heroine, Margaret] (170). To my mind, Euphra's pretty feet represent her fancifulness and weakness, and the fact that Hugh is drawn to them implies his spiritual blindness or lack of capacity, being attracted by her ostensible beauty. He perceives Margaret's appearance as follows: 'The only parts about her which Hugh disliked were her hands and feet. The former certainly had been reddened and roughened by household work' (77).

Works Cited

- Andrews, Elizabeth. 'Stirring the Senses: Identity and Suspense in George MacDonald's *David Elginbrod*.' *Rethinking George MacDonald: Contexts and Contemporaries*. Ed. Christopher MacLachlan, John Patrick Pazdziora and Ginger Stelle. Glasgow: Scottish Literature International, 2013. 157-174.
- MacDonald, George. *David Elginbrod*. Whitethorn: Johannesen, 1995.
- . *Lilith*. Whitethorn: Johannesen, 2009.
- . *Phantastes: A Faerie Romance For Men And Women*. Whitethorn: Johannesen, 2009.
- . *The Portent: A Story of the Inner Vision of the Highlanders Commonly Called The Second Sight*. New York: Harper & Row, 1979.
- Milton, John. 'Paradise Lost.' *John Milton: The Major Works*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Raeper, William. *George MacDonald*. Tring: Lion Publishing, 1987.
- 'somnambulism.' *Oxford English Dictionary*. Retrieved 23 August 2016 <<https://dictionary.oed.com/>>
- Wolff, Robert Lee. *The Golden Key: A Study of The Fiction of George MacDonald*. New York: Yale University Press, 1961.