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George MacDonald and T. S. Eliot: Further Consideration

John Pennington

In her discussion of MacDonald's *Lilith* (1895) and Eliot's "Burnt Norton" and to a lesser degree "Ash Wednesday," Kathryn Walls remarks that "one feels that Eliot must have read MacDonald and that he recollected him in writing more than just "Burnt Norton." *Lilith*, with its explicit symbolism and conventional story line, provides interesting clues to the meaning of some of Eliot's most evocative, internally resonant, and enigmatic images" (51). Jean MacIntyre has traced Eliot's use of the rose-fire in "East Coker" and "Little Gidding" to MacDonald's children's books, *The Princess and the Goblin* (1872) and *The Princess and Curdie* (1882); though MacIntyre is hesitant to say that Eliot positively [end of page 12] read MacDonald, she does conclude: "Tower, labyrinth, blighted land, underground journey, maimed king, and symbols of eucharist figure in Eliot's work almost from its beginnings; though it seems improbable that he took all of them from unconscious recollection of MacDonald's books, their long importance to him might eventually summon up so striking an object as a rose, fire, especially when it was already associated in its source with his own vocabulary of symbols, and when the poems already had a good deal to say, separately, about rose and fire" (38). More recently, Keith Wilson notes the similarities between Eliot's and MacDonald's use of the wasteland and contends that *Phantastes* (1858) deals with "that other waste land that might conceivably be saved by advice—Datta. Dayadhvan. Damyata./ Give. Sympathize. Control" (148). There is, then, a growing critical dialogue that discusses MacDonald and Eliot in the same breath. My concern in this paper is to examine the relationship between MacDonald and Eliot in greater detail. My approach is twofold: first, I will trace a connection between Eliot's *Landscapes* and MacDonald's ancestry and how Eliot uses imagery in *Landscapes* that may echo *Lilith*. Second, I will compare "Ash Wednesday" and *Lilith*; it is my contention that MacDonald's *Lilith* is at the heart of Eliot's "Ash Wednesday," not only in imagery but also in vision. MacDonald's influence on Eliot, I hope to show, clarifies many of Eliot's images and themes and adds a further dimension to our understanding of

Eliot as poet and MacDonald as influence.

Before discussing *Lilith* and “Ash Wednesday,” I would like to examine briefly Eliot’s *Landscapes*, published in 1936, though probably written shortly after Eliot’s stay in the United States, 1932-33 (Headings

138). In “New Hampshire,” the first poem of the series, Eliot [13] writes:

Children’s voices in the orchard
Between the blossom—and the fruit-time:
Golden head, crimson head,
Between the green tip and the root . . .
Golden head, black wing,
Cling, swing,
Spring, sing,
Swing up into the apple-tree.¹

These children’s voices anticipate “Burnt Norton” where “the leaves were full of children./ Hidden excitedly, containing laughter” and where “There rises the hidden laughter/ Of children in the foliage . . .” “East Coker” also has “The laughter in the garden, echoed ecstasy/ Not lost, but requiring, pointing to the agony/ Of death and birth.” And “Little Gidding” ends with “The voice of the hidden waterfall/ And the children in the apple-tree . . .” Walls has traced the image of the laughing children in the trees to MacDonald’s *Lilith* (49); thus it seems safe to conclude that we have an echo of *Lilith* in the first poem of *Landscapes*.

More significant, though, is the connection between Eliot’s fourth poem in the series—“Rannoch, by Glencoe”—and MacDonald. “Rannoch, by Glencoe,” writes Nancy Hargrove in *Landscape as Symbol in the Poetry of T. S. Eliot* (1978), “shifts to a landscape of death as the poet meditates on the destructive, violent quality of the soul devoid of spiritual significance” (123). “This is surely one of Eliot’s most desolate and sinister landscapes” (124), concludes Hargrove. Eliot is using in this poem an historical episode, that of the Glencoe Massacre, a bloody massacre that took place February 13, 1692. The Clan murdered is none other than the MacDonald Clan, ancestors of George MacDonald. In *George MacDonald and His Wife* (1924), Greville MacDonald traces the historical roots of the MacDonald family and insists that the Glencoe Massacre stands central in his father’s mind, especially the barren landscape: [14] “Most who visit it are oppressed with a feeling of awe, even of terror—so endless seems its narrow cleft, so gloomy its barren mountains, with their wind and mist and rain” (42). Yet Greville sees another aspect of Glencoe:

Its warmth and fertility, its woody, roe-haunted springs, and the sky-blue burn that races and loiters in circuitous whirl through the peaceful glen, its bird-song from sky or rowan-bower; these and its desolating storms combined to make fit stronghold for a brave and poetical people. For all the MacIains—that tribe of the Clan Donald who claimed Glencoe for their own—were poets. (42)

Eliot's use of the Glencoe incident suggests that he was aware of the ancestry of the MacDonald Clan which would probably lead him to George MacDonald and his works. That both men were intrigued by the poetic potential of Glencoe and its history tempts one to conclude that Eliot had read and assimilated MacDonald's writing.

"Rannoch, by Glencoe," in fact, appears to be employing imagery from *Lilith*. Hargrove argues that "the region itself then is an historical emblem of the destruction and brutality of man's soul acting on its own and is a highly appropriate objective correlative for Eliot's meaning" (125). In *Lilith*, Vane, the protagonist, after refusing to sleep—to die—re-enters fairyland realizing his spiritual weakness and searches for Mr. Raven's—Adam's—cemetery. His quest leads him to "The Bad Burrow" and "The Evil Wood," a wasteland where the dead do not rest, a wasteland symbolic of Vane's diseased soul. The landscape is sinister, the moon foreboding and aware of impending danger: "The moon seemed to know something, for she stared at me oddly. Her look was indeed icy-cold, but full of interest, or at least curiosity" (48). This moon is similar to Eliot's "Moon cold or moon hot" that shines on the barren landscape. As Vane journeys he comes upon a scene fantastic: [15]

Wild cries and roars of rage, shock of onset, struggle prolonged, all mingled with words articulate, surged in my ears. Curses and credos, snarls and sneers, laughter and mockery, sacred names and howls of hate, came huddling in chaotic interpenetration. Skeletons and phantoms fought in maddest confusion. Swords swept through the phantoms; they only shivered. Maces crashed on the skeletons, shattering them hideously: not one fell or ceased to fire, so long as a single joint held two bones together. Bones of men and horse lay scattered and heaped; grinding and crunching them under foot fought the skeletons. Everywhere charged the bone-gaunt white steeds; everywhere on foot or on wind-blown misty battle-horses, raged and ravened and

raved the indestructable spectres; weapons and hoofs clashed and crushed; while skeleton jaws and phantom-throats swelled the deafening tumult with the war-cry of every opinion, bad or good, that had bred strife, injustice, cruelty in any world . . . Lie-distorted truths flew hurtling in the wind of javelins and bones. Every moment some one would turn against his comrades, and fight more wildly than before, *The Truth! The Truth! The Truth!* still the cry. (53-54)

MacDonald's description captures well the futility and treachery of the battle, and the wasteland imagery and senseless battle could be his description of the Glencoe massacre.² Eliot's poem tends to echo MacDonald: "The road winds in/ Listlessness of ancient war/ Langour of broken steel,/ Clamour of confused wrong, apt/ In silence." The narrator ruminates over the skeletal remains of the dead and their influence on the living: "memory is strong/ Beyond the bone. Pride snapped,/ Shadow of pride is long, in the long pass/ No concurrence of bone." Eliot writes that "Substance crumbles, in the thin air," and MacDonald describes Vane's difficulty in verifying his "vision": "Just before sunrise, a breeze went through the forest, and a voice cried, 'Let the dead bury their dead!' At the word the contending thousands dropped noiseless, and when the sun looked in, he saw never a bone, but here and there a withered branch" (54). MacDonald's landscape seems reflected in Eliot's, and it is interesting to speculate that both Eliot and MacDonald were describing historical scenes—that of the Glencoe massacre.

Walls is correct in claiming that "*Lilith's* influence may go beyond [16] the *Four Quartets*." She sees connections between *Lilith* and "Ash Wednesday": the fountain, the talking bird, the leopards, and Mara as prototype of the redemptive lady in the poem (49-50). I would like to suggest further connections. In Part I of the poem the narrator pleads: "May the judgement not be too heavy upon us/ Because these wings are no longer wings to fly/ But merely vans to beat the air . . ." Compare Eliot's lines to MacDonald's description of Diamond's dream in *At the Back of the North Wind* (1871): "But scarcely had he noticed so much as this before a merry shouting and laughter burst upon him, and a number of naked little boys came running, every one eager to get to him first. At the shoulders of each fluttered two little wings, which were of no use for flying, as they could not help fluttering as if they were flying" (207). The dream also contains stairs, roses, fountains, flames (205), and, thus, It seems that this MacDonald work is also on Eliot's mind as he writes "Ash Wednesday," and it may also be that

this work is also reflected in the *Four Quartets*.

Part II begins with the “Lady” and the “three white leopards” which feed on the narrator’s heart and liver “and that which had been contained/ In the hollow round of [his] skull.” *Lilith* has two white leopards—one spotted, one pure. The spotted one—Lilith herself—feeds off Vane, gathering his life into hers. Chapter XIX is entitled “The White Leech” and describes Lilith’s vampiristic tendencies (103-108); Chapter XXIV is entitled “The White Leopardess” (122). Also in Part II of the poem are the chirping bones—an allusion to Ezekiel’s dry bones passage of course—but we have already discussed the skeletons’ importance in *Lilith* and possible influence on Eliot. In “Ash Wednesday” the bones sing: “We are glad to be scattered, we did little good to each [17] other,/ Under a tree in the cool of the day, with the blessing of sand,/ Forgetting themselves and each other, united/ In the quiet hour of the desert.” In *Lilith*, Vane spies an aristocratic skeleton-couple who believe they must be in a dream: “By heaven, I have no recollections of you!” (90). They bicker and fight as if alive, only their bones are dry and brittle, on the verge of crumbling. Mr. Raven explains to Vane why they did little good to each other when they were alive:

They felt themselves rich too while they have pockets, but they have already begun to feel rather pinched. My lord used to regard my lady as a worthless encumbrance, for he was tired of her beauty and had spent her money; now he needs her to cobble his joints for him! These changes have roots of hope in them. Besides, they cannot now get far away from each other, and they see none else of their own kind: they must at least grow weary of their mutual repugnance, and begin to love one another! for love, not hate, is deepest in what Love “loved into being.” (94)

The couple eventually learns to love each other, and it is interesting that in “Ash Wednesday” the skeletons sing “For the Garden/ Where all love ends.” They also sing: “Lady of silences . . . Rose of memory/ Rose of forgetfulness . . . The single Rose/ Is now the Garden . . . Of love satisfied/ End of the endless . . .” “The ‘Endless Ending’” (250) is the title of the last chapter of *Lilith*. Thus in Part II of “Ash Wednesday” Eliot uses the images of the white lady, leopards feeding, bones singing, roses, and gardens—all images that MacDonald uses in *Lilith*.

A central symbol in “Ash Wednesday” is the stairs, which headings identifies as “the three purgatorial stairs which are close echoes of two

details in Dante . . .” (123). Hargrove writes of the stair that “it is symbolic of the difficulty of spiritual ascent . . . [I]t partakes of Dante’s purgatorial mountain with its ‘rock-walls sheer,’ its narrow cornices, and its treacherous, winding path . . .” (99). *Lilith*’s major **[18]** theme is exactly that of spiritual ascent, the problem of spiritual ascent. Eliot’s narrator climbs the second stair and sees “below/ The same shape twisted on the banister? Under the vapour in the fetid air/ Struggling with the devil of the stairs who wears/ The deceitful face of hope and of despair”; Vane in his climb passes “the fearful hollow where once had wallowed the monsters of the earth . . . Coiled in spires, folded in layers, knotted on themselves, or ‘extended long and large,’ they weltered in motionless heaps—shapes more fantastic in ghoulish, blasting dismay, than ever wine-sodden brain of exhausted poet fevered into mlsbelng” (224). The end of the fantasy has Vane climbing a stair that is cut from a mountain (249). Vane’s climb is for naught, though, for as he reaches the gate to the great city with his “heart beating with hope and desire” (250), a hand gently but firmly pushes him through a door that forces him back to the real world, back to his library. Note MacDonald’s description of Vane’s ascent:

There was no wall on the upper side, but a huge pile of broken rocks, unsloping like the moraine of an external glacier; and through the opening between the rocks, the river came billowing out. On their top I could dimly discern what seemed three or four great septs [sic] of a stair, disappearing in a cloud white as snow; and above the steps I saw, but with my mind’s eye only, as it were a grand old chair, the throne of the Ancient of Days. Over and under and between those steps issued, plenteously, unceasingly new-born, the river of the water of life.
(250)

The end of “Ash Wednesday” has the narrator waiting among the rocks for the “blessed sister, holy mother, spirit of the fountain, spirit of the garden . . . Sister, Mother/ And spirit of the river, spirit of the sea— . . .” Greville MacDonald writes that his father had “‘a passion for stairs.’ Indeed, a full essay might be written on his symbolic utterance, so close akin is it to transcendental mysticism, and, I more than suspect, to the Celtic second-sight” (481). *Lilith*, *Phantastes*, the **[19]** rely [sic] on the symbol of the stair. In a poem quoted in *George MacDonald and His Wife*, MacDonald writes: “Let us go on. We do not care/ For ought but life that is all one with love:/ We seek not death, but still we climb the stair/ Where death is one wide landing

to the rooms above” (485). As with the rose-fire, the stairs in MacDonald’s work is central; if Eliot used the rose-fire from MacDonald, then he might have also been influenced by MacDonald’s use of stairs.

It is in Part IV of the poem that Walls sees *Lilith* specifically alluded to. The lines “But the fountain sprang up and the bird sang down/ Redeem the time, redeem the dream/ The token of the word unheard, unspoken,” argues Walls, is taken from Chapter XXVII of *Lilith* where Vane climbs a tree which deposits him into a water fountain, Mr. Raven taunting him for his foolish actions. And she sees Mara reflected in Eliot’s “serene mediatrix” and asks: “Is [Mara] one ancestress of Eliot’s redemptive ‘Lady of Silences,’ ‘the Mother’ (II)—with her ‘three white leopards’ (II), her ‘white gown’ (II), her veil (V), and her association with Mary (IV)?” (50). “The fourth section [of “Ash Wednesday”] recreates the earthly paradise setting of Dante’s meeting with Beatrice” (124), writes Headings; Hargrove describes this section as presenting “a vision of the higher dream of the soul’s surroundings upon attaining purification. The setting is a serene garden with fountains and springs of living water, with yew trees . . . with singing birds and quiet pathways”—she identifies allusions to Eden and to Dante’s Earthly Paradise (102). In describing Mr. Raven’s wife (Eve), MacDonald uses similar imagery as he does in describing Mara: “What a change had passed upon her! It was as if the splendour of her eyes had grown too much for them to hold, and, sinking into her countenance, made it flash with a **[20]** loveliness like that of Beatrice in the white rose of the redeemed, life itself, life eternal, immortal, streamed from it, an unbroken lightning” (32). Vane loses Lona—“My heart died within me. I had lost my Lona” (237)—and once he is back into reality, he muses, “As yet I have not found Lona, but Mara is much with me. She has taught me many things, and is teaching me more” (250). Beatrice represents the bridge between earthly love and heavenly love, and MacDonald equates Mara, Eve, and Lona with Beatrice using the “white” image to connect all three—that Eliot uses the same imagery is intriguing.

Eliot’s “unread vision in the higher dream” in Part IV would be an apt description of the end of *Lilith*, for the end of the fantasy presents such a higher dream: we get a glimpse of Paradise. Part V of “Ash Wednesday” has the “veiled lady” praying for those souls who are being raided for the divine revelation, “the higher dream.” The image of “the veiled sister” waiting “For children at the gate” parallels the “woman-angel” in *Lilith* who greets the children at the gate—“Without the briefest halt, the Little Ones ran straight up the stairs to the gate which stood open” (249). Even Eliot’s description

“Of drought, spitting from the mouth the withered apple-seed” may be from Vane’s first meeting with the children, the Lovers. The “test” Vane by having him eat an apple that the giants—the Bags, the spiritually diseased—eat; Vane says, “I sat up, took the apple, smiled thanks, and would have eaten; but the moment I bit into it, I flung it far away” (57).

Finally, In Part VI, the narrator realizes that by losing self and by having humility, by waiting “to sit still,” for “This is the time of tension between dying and birth,” that there is hope: “Suffer me not to be separated/ And let my cry come unto Thee.” The narrator is in “The place of solitude where three dreams cross,” and it is interesting that [21] *Lilith* ends with Vane, so much alone, dreaming many dreams: “I heard as one in a dream” (229). At the end of *Lilith* Vane waits; he has learned to sit still among the rocks: “I wait; asleep or awake, I wait” (252). Eliot’s poem ends with the narrator waiting for the “Blessed sister, holy mother, spirit of the fountain, spirit of the/ garden . . . And spirit of the river, spirit of the sea . . .”; *Lilith* ends with Vane waiting for Lona, Mara, and Eve. As he waits the narrator of “Ash Wednesday” requests, “But when the voices shaken from the yew-tree drift away/ Let the other yew be shaken and reply.” Vane admits at the end of *Lilith*:

“All the days of my appointed time will I wait till my change come.” 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 words, they cease, and all is very still. (251-52)

Both Eliot’s narrator and Vane wait. Vane ends his narrative with a quote from Novalis: “Novalis says, ‘Our life is no dream, but it should and will perhaps become one’” (252). *Lilith* ends with Vane in a similar state as Eliot’s narrator, “Wavering between the profit and the loss/ In this brief transit where the dreams cross/ The dreamcrossed twilight between birth and dying,” for “This is the time of tension between dying and birth/ The place of solitude where three dreams cross . . .”

Hargrove concludes of “Ash Wednesday”: “Thus the natural landscape in ‘Ash Wednesday’ plays an unquestionably significant role in

symbolising the arduousness of the spiritual ascent as well as the final joy that awaits the determined soul” (106). This statement could have been written in reference to *Lilith*. We have seen that many of Eliot’s images are also found in MacDonald, and one can only conclude that Eliot [22] must have read MacDonald and been influenced by him, a sentiment Walls concludes with in her essay (51). C. S. Lewis writes that after he read *Phantastes* for the first time, “I knew that I had crossed a great frontier What [*Phantastes*] actually did to me was to convert, even to baptise . . . my imagination” (26). It just may be that Eliot crossed that very same frontier and had his imagination baptized by George MacDonald.

Endnotes

1. All citations to Eliot’s poems will be from *The Complete Poems and Plays*, New York: Harcourt, Brace (1952).
2. It is interesting to compare this description to Eliot’s description of the bones in *The Waste Land*: “I think we are In rats’ alley/ Where the dead men lost their bones” (II); “But at my back in a cold blast I hear/ The rattle of bones, and chuckle, spread from ear to ear” (III); “White bodies naked on the low damp ground/ And bones cast in a little low dry garret,/ Rattled by the rat’s foot only, year to year” (III); “A current under sea/ Picked his bones in whispers. As he rose and fell/ He passed the stages of his age and youth” (IV); “There is the empty chapel, only the wind’s home./ It has no windows, and the door swings,/ Dry bones can harm no one” (V). Also in *Lilith* is a description of a skeleton dance which is as fantastic and terrifying as the skeleton battle (85-88). MacDonald’s wasteland is literally “A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,/ And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief” (I). Keith Wilson has acknowledged the similarities between *The Waste Land* and *Phantastes* (148), but his comment is in passing. It would be profitable to do a study of *Phantastes* and *Lilith* as influence on *The Waste Land*.

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