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Some Ironies in the Last Chapters of *Lilith*

John Docherty

*Once meek, and in a perilous path,
The just man kept his course along
The vale of death.
Roses are planted where thorns grow,
And on the barren heath
Sing the honey bees.*

*Then the perilous path was planted:
And a river and a spring
On every cliff and tomb:
And on the bleached bones
Red clay brought forth.
Till the villain left the paths of ease
To walk in perilous paths and drive
The just man into barren climes.*

*Now the sneaking serpent walks
In mild humility,
And the just man rages in the wilds
Where lions roam.*
—William Blake from the Argument to
The Marriage of Heaven and Hell.

1. Introduction

George MacDonald's *Lilith* is usually read as a Gothic fantasy with powerful Christian content. The Gothic element is well brought out by the jacket illustration of the best-selling modern paperback edition, issued by the religious publishers Eerdmans, which amalgamates some of the most powerful Gothic images in the story. Stephen Prickett stresses that it is the "preponderance of image over plot that is the hallmark of the Gothic convention" (*Victorian* 74). In *Lilith*, however, the images seem to preponderate only because of their power. The book has a clear story-line. Roderick McGillis suggests that with narrative of the kind found in *Lilith*, "the emphasis lies not so much on the specific meaning of the narrative as on the quality of the reader's response" ("George

MacDonald” 42). But in *Lilith*, and particularly in the last chapters of the book, the specific meaning of the narrative for readers is wholly dependant upon the quality of their response. Both responsiveness to the power of the images and close reading of the text are required.

There are numerous ironies in *Lilith* which can be appreciated only by “close reading.” If they are not recognized, and accepted as ironies, the story collapses into a work that repeatedly disregards the natural laws MacDonald describes in “The Fantastic Imagination” (1893)—laws which, as he stresses, apply as fully to “products of the imagination” as to the “natural” world:

When [literary creations] are new embodiments of old truths, we call them products of the Imagination, when they are mere inventions, however lovely, I should call them the work of the Fancy: in either case, Law has been diligently at work

Law is the soil in which alone beauty will grow (314-15).¹

Changes MacDonald made from draft to draft of *Lilith* all strengthen his ironic undercutting of the crude evangelical triumphalism that he realized would be likely to be read into the ending of his story. His approach is ruthless, although grounded in Romantic irony. Only a small number of the ironies in *Lilith* attain to the level of high Romantic irony achieved by those in some of MacDonald’s early fairy-tales such as “The Light Princess” and “The Cruel Painter.”² The change with *Lilith* does not seem due to any diminishment of MacDonald’s creative powers, but because his primary concern is to address urgent issues concerned with *fin de siècle* morality, both in spiritual and in secular life. His son Greville famously commented that his father “was possessed by a feeling—he would hardly let me call it a conviction I think—that [*Lilith*] was a mandate direct from God, for which he himself was to find form and clothing” (548). Many of the ironies in *Lilith* can only be described as savage. They can scarcely be comprehended except in relation to MacDonald’s attempts to escape from—and assist concerned readers to escape from—the prevalent authoritarian Christianity of the period. He had been compromised into the position of an authoritarian Christian sage when the family was surrounded by English expatriates while residing at Bordighera from 1880 onwards, but such an outlook was directly antithetical to the radical Christianity of his early writings.

Robert Lee Wolff points out that *Lilith* “ought to end” after the protagonist Vane lies down to sleep in Adam’s cemetery at the end of chapter 42.³ This is obviously correct for the outer level of the plot. “But MacDonald was facing a dilemma. Vane is the narrator. Vane is dead; how then can Vane have told his story?” (365). This dilemma is far less crucial than Wolff believes, because, at

the end of chapter 9, Vane had stressed that he is bi-locally existing: “While without a doubt, for instance, that I was regarding a scene of activity, I might be, at the same moment, in my consciousness aware that I was pursuing a metaphysical argument” (46). Similarly, although Vane’s experiences described in chapters 43 to 46 are in the “B” draft stated to be “only a dream” (217 in vol. I of the *Variorum Edition*),⁴ it does not seem that Vane here is using the word “dream” in its everyday meaning, but with the common alternative meaning of “a wish-fulfillment fancy”— although this is undoubtedly a more than usually intense fancy.

Wolff goes on to state, “I believe that all the remainder of *Lilith* represents nothing but MacDonald’s extrication of himself from this mechanical problem” (365). Yet MacDonald extricates himself from that problem by the end of chapter 43, with four more chapters still to follow. The end of chapter 43 is as complete and apt a closure of the story as is the end of chapter 42, although totally contrasting in mood, and the same is true of the end of chapter 46.

Wolff finds no difficulty pointing to some details in chapter 46 that contradict the popular “evangelical fundamentalist” reading of that chapter as a triumphal entry into the true New Jerusalem:⁵

As the party enters the city, angels carry off the children. One of the angels says, “These are the angels [sic] to take heaven itself by storm. I hear of a horde of black bats on the frontiers: these will make short work with such!”

Where are we supposed to think the children are? Have they really got to heaven? Then why the reference to “taking [sic] heaven itself by storm”? And if it is really the heavenly city, then why the black bats on the frontiers? (369)

Wolff’s writing here is careless: MacDonald’s text has “soldiers” not “angels,” and “taking” should not be within the quotation marks. A more serious error is where, in the previous sentence, the baby-talk of the youngest of the children (Little Ones) is put by Wolff into the mouth of Lilia, the eldest and leader of the Little Ones. Whether all this carelessness arises from exasperation or from a subconscious realization that MacDonald’s imagery has not broken down as completely as Wolff imagines is difficult to determine. Chapters 44-46 of *Lilith* provide abundant evidence to refute Wolff’s claim that MacDonald “had lost control of his imagery” (368).⁶ However, they also contain abundant examples, augmenting those of Wolff, of the ambiguous nature of the heavenly pilgrimage. Most of this evidence is associated with the subtle ironies present in these chapters.

Vane’s imaginative state for most of the book is defined by the Raven as

“the region of the seven dimensions ’ . . . with a curious noise in his throat, and a flutter of his tail” (18) that seem to denote awe and reverence.⁷ This state is antithetical to any ordinary “dream.” The two opposite states seem, more or less, to correspond with Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s famous distinction in chapter 13 of his *Biographia Literaria* between the Secondary Imagination and the mere Fancy. The latter, having “no counters to play with but fixities and definites. [...] must receive all its materials ready made from the law of association” (167).

In *Lilith*, MacDonald draws upon images of Temptation, Fall and Eternal Torment from Blake’s *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (Docherty, “An Ambivalent Marriage”). He possessed “an early hand-coloured reproduction” of this book (Greville MacDonald 555), and the last chapters of *Lilith* seem to be an elaboration of its Argument (reproduced above), which appears on Blake’s plate 2 interpenetrated by his pictorial image of Temptation (see note 23). Vane is no Blakean “just man.” In the earlier chapters he does walk “in the wilds,” but hyenas roam there (79), not Lions. After sleeping in Adam’s cemetery he finds that “the perilous path [has been] planted: / And a river and a spring on every cliff.” But he does not realize that “the villain” and “the sneaking serpent” have walked “in [the] perilous paths” and adapted the New Jerusalem to their own needs.

The details of Vane’s “dream” in chapters 44 to 46 of *Lilith* need to be examined carefully. His falling “asleep” in chapter 42 is his eventual capitulation to what was pressed upon him at the beginning of the book: acceptance of the almost wholly Old-Testament “Christianity” preached by most churches of the time in Britain.⁸ Few things could be further from “Jesus the Imagination,” the focus of Blake’s thought.⁹

A major stimulus for MacDonald to write what became *Lilith* was the publication in 1889, by his friend Lewis Carroll, of *Sylvie and Bruno*. This is an imaginative biography of Carroll’s relationship with the MacDonald family in the recent past and in visionary memories of when the children were young (Docherty, *Literary* 337-64.). “Bruno” is Greville MacDonald as a small boy, and “Sylvie” the MacDonald girls, particularly Mary.¹⁰ In the “B” draft page 1 and the “C” draft page 3 of *Lilith*, Vane states that “the only one whom I have any reason to care about as a reader is my one college friend, who will himself know whom I mean, and that is enough, for there can be no mistake.” There can be no mistake; this is undoubtedly Carroll. There are allusions to all of Carroll’s major fiction in *Lilith*. *Through the Looking-Glass* has provided most for the overall structure of *Lilith* (Docherty, *Literary* 375-86), but the allusions to the *Inferno* in *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* were probably a major stimulus for

MacDonald's covert allusions to Dante and for his two brief quotations from *The Divine Comedy*.

2. The Last Chapters

When Vane has lain down to sleep in Adam's house of death, chapter 43 of *Lilith* begins with "high dreams." Critics have noted that these dreams resemble the early dreams of the eponymous hero of Charles Kingsley's *Alton Locke* in chapter 36.¹¹ Vane's visionary dreams pass into ones of repairing wrongs he has committed, superficially similar to Anodos' briefly described imaginings after he has drowned his lower feelings at the end of chapter 18 of *Phantastes*. However, the "[C]ountless services" for his friends that Vane devises to perform in the future resemble the extravagant temptations of Lillian in Alton's dream, not the intelligent loving service that appeals to Alton and is encouraged by his positive dream figure, Eleanor. "For this one I would build such a house as had never grown from the ground! For that one I would train such horses as had never yet been seen in any world! . . .," and so on (242). These grandiose empty visions are a "Vane-show."¹²

Then "suddenly"—and MacDonald emphasizes the word by repetition—Vane's dream changes and he "awakens" in a now-empty house of death. He runs out and finds the former "monsters' den" become "a lovely lake" (243). Beyond there is a Blakean "river, and a spring / On every cliff." As Vane stands "lost in delight" a hand is laid on his shoulder. It is Adam in his "seventh dimension" aspect as "Father," at first apparently speaking as wisely as in his initial appearances as Raven. But accepting a false religion, however persuasively it is presented, is moral and mental suicide.

As Adam/Father consoles Vane, his language gradually changes to a debased form of the language of the King James Bible. MacDonald does not use this archaic language in his *Unspoken Sermons* (except for quotations and the like), even though it was accepted in preaching of the time, and only faint traces of it are present when Adam in his Adam-dimension speaks to Vane earlier in *Lilith*. Thus one cannot avoid the feeling that, in rising to the highest dimension of "Father," Adam ought to have transcended such an affectation, not slipped into it. Father tells Vane he is still sleeping on his "bed in the house of death" (245). Even after further sermonizing reassurance, however, Vane comments: "To myself I seemed wide awake, but I believed I was in a dream, because he had told me so" (246). The emphasizing comma after "dream" is intentional. Father's final sentence begins: "Truth is all in all," which inevitably recalls the battle cry "*The Truth! The Truth!*" used by both the skeletons and the opposing

specters in the Evil Wood in chapter 11.

Vane resumes his wanderings until he sinks down “beside a pit in the rock, whose mouth was like that of a grave.” It is “deep and dark” and he can “see no bottom.” He does not notice the pit until he has rested and is about to resume his journey. But then he recalls that

in the dreams of my childhood I had found that a fall invariably woke me, and would, therefore, when desiring to discontinue a dream, seek some eminence whence to cast myself down that I might wake: with one glance at the peaceful heavens and one at the rushing waters, I rolled myself over the edge of the pit. (247)

He seems not to realize that a grave-like pit is antithetical to an eminence and that his action thus tends towards suicide. Predictably he does die (in the terminology of the Region of the Seven Dimensions), finding himself back in his own house. His immediate desire is to “go back to Adam . . . and bow to his decree!” He is not regarding Adam as “God” here so much as an authoritarian churchman who believes himself aware of every aspect of God’s design for the world.¹³ Unable now to operate the polarization apparatus in his attic, Vane falls into deep despair. He feels he is “desolate, drearily desolate” (248). A comment of MacDonald’s in “The Shadows” is relevant here. He remarks of Ralph Rinkelmann’s vision of the Shadow-church:

After all that he had seen in the Shadow-church his own room and its shadows were yet more wonderful and unintelligible than those.

This made it the more likely that he had seen a true vision; for instead of making common things look commonplace, as a false vision would have done, it had made common things disclose the wonderful that was in them. (64)

Vane’s comments in the closing paragraph of chapter 43 show him more than desolate: “had [Lona] ever been? . . . straight from my death-bed, I will set out to find her! If she is not, I will go to the Father and say—even thou canst not help me: let me cease I pray thee!” These words echo those of Duncan Campbell in *The Portent* at the point in his story when he comes closest to fully acknowledging that he is mad:¹⁴

the thought of the loss of my reason did not in itself trouble me much. What tortured me . . . was the possible fact, which a return to my right mind might reveal—that there never had been a Lady Alice. What if I died, and awoke from my madness, and found a clear blue air of life, a joyous world of sunshine, a divine wealth of delight around and in me—but no Lady Alice—she

having vanished with all the other phantoms of a sick brain!
Were I to wake to such a heaven, I would pray God to let
me go and live the life I had but dreamed. (94-95)

As Lona is archetypal *agape*, Vane's erotic desire to possess her is blasphemous madness. The metaphysical poets, whom MacDonald loved, frequently combine erotic with religious imagery, but in vastly more subtle ways than this.¹⁵

Only four days later, Vane has the dream recognized as "only a dream" in the "B" draft of *Lilith* but accepted at the overt level in subsequent versions as an actual return to the Region of the Seven Dimensions. It is described in chapters 44 to 46 of the final version. Not everything in these chapters is ironic. The irony is very greatly intensified by the inclusion of passages that are primarily or more-or-less wholly positive.

Vane awakens in Adam's cemetery and Lona has apparently awakened just before him. Yet she is a prelapsarian being who, unlike Adam, never subsequently lapsed, and who apparently lives permanently in the Region of the Seven Dimensions. So why did she have to sleep in Adam's cemetery at all, even if she represents here *agape* Vane has legitimately taken for himself?

Many "sleepers" have risen and departed while Vane slept. This puzzles Wolff (367) who cannot grasp that MacDonald did not favor a universal Judgment Day. Nevertheless, Adam in his sixth dimension as Herald of the Sun (Docherty, "An Ambivalent Marriage") ought to herald a glorious resurrection day for every individual. Vane now sees Adam and Eve here as "angels of the resurrection" (252), and many another awakening soul may have done so before. But the crowing of the golden cock is a different matter because Adam specifically says that: "Silent and motionless for millions of years has he stood on the clock of the universe; now at last he is flapping his wings! and at intervals will men hear him until the dawn of the day eternal." And, straight on cue, the cock crows. There have been previous signs of Vane's prodigious vanity, but that he should dream he is the first to hear the golden cock is astonishing. There is, however, another aspect to the cock's crowing here. As a traditional symbol of a call to awakening it seems to be an attempt to awaken readers to recognize MacDonald's depiction of how the whole subject of resurrection has become perverted by Blake's "villain."

Vane, expecting to marry Lona, is now accepted as one of the family by Lona's step-sister and her parents. As many, many millions have presumably passed through Adam's cemetery, this rankles at the imaginative and the literal levels. At the allegorical level it is acceptable because numerous people have come to love Lona as *agape*, and through this would have come to be acceptable

to her allegorical relatives. Yet MacDonald rarely if ever writes at a merely allegorical level. He comments in “The Fantastic Imagination,” “[H]e must be an artist indeed who can, in any mode, produce a strict allegory that is not a weariness to the spirit” (317). So the superficial attractiveness of this “great reunion scene,” with its talk between Vane and Adam and his family would seem to be a delusion.

Most of the Little Ones are awakened by the crowing of the golden cock.¹⁶ It can seem that in their innocence they should have awoken before Vane. But these are twelve of the colony of Little Ones cared for by Lona who were chosen by Vane after her death to be his disciples (200). On the way to Adam’s house Vane clumsily attempted to teach them moral virtues (202-04), even though previously (when outside the Region of the Seven Dimensions and at his home) he had admitted to Adam that they were “far ahead” of him (147). Adam has more than once stressed to Vane that all those who sleep in his cemetery grow visibly towards perfection. Yet the Little Ones seem unchanged. If they were perfect before, the same problem arises as with Lona: why should they have had to sleep? Vane does not sleep when he returns to Adam’s cemetery with the children in the “A” version (381). The difficulty is partially (although only partially) explained by these children in later drafts being the “little ones” referred to several times by Christ in the gospels, who represent what grows in people’s souls when they begin to become again as little children (Docherty in Pennington 64-65). Here representing what is growing in Vane’s soul, it is natural they should awaken to the cry of the golden cock, since that is a call to the higher self. Two, out of love, have attached themselves to Lilith and do not wake. One of these is called Peter, presumably after the Peter who did not awaken until the cock had crowed thrice.

As the cockerel crows, the “great Shadow” departs. Adam had previously laid great stress on this devil being wholly associated with Lilith. He told Lilith that she and the Shadow “will be the last to wake in the morning of the universe” (228). That situation has not changed. Yet Vane is unsurprised at the Shadow’s departure. He apparently feels this should be a natural consequence of his own awakening. At one level it is, because Lilith was within himself and now he is leaving her behind.

Chapter 45 is titled “The Journey Home.” MacDonald here creates many parallels with Vane’s earlier crusade to Bulika. Vane’s irresponsibility when planning to make that crusade with the whole colony of Little Ones is detailed in chapter 34. Lona realized it was necessary the Little Ones learned to face human evil and felt that the crusade was a way of achieving this. Vane, however, gave

no thought at all to the likely effect upon them, and MacDonald covertly links Vane's irresponsibility with that of the leaders of the ill-fated Children's Crusade.

This time there are no birds leading the party. Lona leads, and in contrast to the previous crusade there are only eleven to follow her—Vane and ten Little Ones—a clear allusion to Christ with the disciples after the Resurrection. The beasts that were brought from the previous crusade, a horse and some elephants, come after. They were required as beasts of burden then. Now they come after because although lowlier than man they are still, according to MacDonald's theology, destined as individual animals for a place in heaven.¹⁷ It is not, however, mentioned whether they slept in Adam's cemetery.

The beginning of chapter 45 is devoted to a fine description of an awakening of the senses such as many people have experienced briefly in this life and taken as a foretaste of the delights of heaven. Vane picks up one detail, the "sweet *tintinning*" of purple heather bells in a breeze, and equates it directly with a two-line quotation from Dante's *Paradiso* 10, 142 where "music of a sweetness so ineffable it can not be described on earth, symbolises the order and harmony in which all the diverse manifestations of God's truth are here conjoined" (Reynolds 139). The Dante quotation would at first seem apt, in showing how the first lowly level of heaven can be linked imaginatively with the harmony of the highest. Heather flowers do sweetly rustle as Vane describes—but not until they are dry and brown.¹⁸ Moreover, MacDonald would have been well aware that the vast majority of the heather of heaths and moors is the Ling (*Caluna*), which does not have bell-shaped flowers.

The party then come "to the fearful hollow where once had wallowed the monsters of the earth." These are still there, although temporarily quiescent. In the "A" version, Vane comments that when he later "speculated on what, vision or reality, the thing might mean, I thought I knew that the ground of that moor outside the house of death was but the out-issue of my own soul, the under-soil of the vineyard of my own being, deep in which, unknown to myself lay such nameless horrors" (299). This comment is both humble and wise. But in the final version Vane—very conscious of his own redeemed state, and yet again fully living up to his homonym Vain—describes the creatures in even more lurid terms than those used earlier in the book. He then gratuitously comments: "So long as exist men and women of unwholesome mind, that lake will still be peopled with loathsomenesses." Wolff—for once understating—asks: "Why should MacDonald feel it necessary to warn again of the vileness of people with unwholesome minds, in the very moment of the final triumph?" (368). But he

has no justification for believing Vane to be MacDonald's mouthpiece here.

Vane's description of the coming of the dawn wind is developed to an exaggerated degree in the final version (256). Even Novalis, in his "Hymns to the Night" attempts nothing like it. But where MacDonald then describes the party crossing the former region of desert, this is described in terms resembling those of Isaiah describing the blossoming of the desert (257). Apparently MacDonald considered Isaiah's account too well known for him to introduce any irony here. In the last paragraph of chapter 45, however, and the whole of chapter 46, there is densely concentrated irony, with the details changing dramatically in successive drafts as MacDonald refines this irony.¹⁹

In every version of *Lilith* the children, in passing through the last forest on the pilgrimage, climb up into the canopy chasing squirrels, cross the canopy, and re-descend—all with extreme rapidity. The forest canopy is described as "embowed" in all versions. But it densifies from "high embowed roofs" in "A," to "thick embowed roofs" in "B," to "one thick embowed roof" in "C," to "a thick embowed roof through which scarce a sunbeam broke" in "D" and "E," to "a thick embowed roof betwixt whose leaves and blossoms hardly a sunbeam filtered" in the corrected "F" and the final version. This sequence is important, because for MacDonald in *Phantastes* chapter 3, as for Blake, trees shutting out the sunlight are a symbol of error and paganism (Docherty, "Dryad" 17).

The later versions of the last paragraph of chapter 45, referring to the children swinging through the forest canopy, have an added final sentence that is yet more sinister. "F" has: "Of monkeys in the region they saw not one," which is simplified in the final version to: "Not one monkey of any sort could they see." The Little Ones had learnt tree-climbing when they took to the trees to avoid the Bags, yet not quite so well as to climb with the speed of monkeys. One here is irresistibly reminded of Charles Kingsley's *Doasyoulikes* in *The Water Babies*, who devolve into tree-dwelling apes without noticing the change (144-49).²⁰

Chapter 46 is titled "The City." The Little Ones first sight the city from the top of the forest canopy, although that is so thick in the final version that they have first to climb one tree "yet taller than the rest" (258). The most complete description of the city is given in the "A" draft a little later: "a great city, built somehow like a city of old on a plain around a mountain and up the sides of the mountain to where the great palace stood among the clouds" (384). In subsequent drafts the party cannot from the tree-tops distinguish what is cloud from mountain or palace, and hardly what is city or sky.

Most of the way, the party has followed the one great river, "up and up," and

now they follow it across the plain towards the city. The use of the word “plain” for this area is surprising, for it must actually be a plateau. Given the best-known Old-Testament association of cities and a “plain,” this usage is not only surprising but disconcerting.

As the party cross the plain the clouds increase around the mountain, moving “with contrary motions” and gyrating. This is mentioned in all versions. A first lightening flash reveals God to the Little Ones, the youngest apparently seeing Him most clearly. Vane records the children’s excited comments. These in “A” are: ““Did you see?” “I saw! Yes I saw.” “What did you see?” “The beautifullest man I ever saw.” “I heard him speak!” “What did he say?” “He said, ‘You’s all mine, little ones! Come on!”” (385). There are subtle modifications to this in the intermediate drafts. In “D” the unnamed “smallest” says that the man said “Ou’s all mine, little ones: come along!” In the final version the smallest is identified as Luva, who tells that: ‘He said “‘Ou’s all mine’s, ’ickle ones: come along!”’ MacDonalld has not put such jarring baby-talk into the mouth of a Little One before this.²¹ In his essay “The Fantastic Imagination” of 1893 he writes:

To be able to live a moment in an imagined world, we must see the laws of its existence obeyed. Those broken, we fall out of it. The imagination in us, whose exercise is essential to the most temporary submission to the imagination of another, immediately, with the disappearance of Law, ceases to act. Suppose the gracious creatures of some childlike region of Fairyland talking either cockney or Gascon! Would not the tale, however lovelily begun, sink at once to the level of the Burlesque—of all forms of literature the least worthy? (315)

With a second lightening flash, Vane sees it “compact of angle faces,” apparently resembling the light around the head of the Madonna in Raphael’s *Sistine Madonna*. “A third flash came; its substance and radiance were human.” A fourth flash reveals the animal kingdom. This last is not just the Platonic archetype of each animal species. Vane carefully stresses that he sees “silvery cranes; red flamingoes; opal pigeons” and so on, all in the plural to accord with MacDonalld’s extraordinary animal theology. Lona’s strangely nonchalant “remark” about serpents and caterpillars appears first in the corrected “F”, and is there ascribed to Luva. There are no fifth and sixth flashes to reveal a plant and a mineral kingdom in MacDonalld’s High Heaven. No thunder accompanies the flashes, possibly because in this context it would have to represent the anger of God. The unqualified allusion to Raphael’s painting would seem to confirm that MacDonalld intends these momentary flashes of light as genuine revelations of

“High” Heaven. But the disappointing banality of the descriptions seems to be a consequence of Vane’s resolution to bow to Adam’s decree. In doing this he renounced any allegiance to what Blake terms “the Devil’s party” and so must experience the gradual loss of his Imagination.

There follows a delightful heavy rain and a rainbow. The party move upstream beside the river, which here flows through a flowering meadow, its unsullied bed a carpet of flowers. In “Cross Purposes” (1862), MacDonald employs a stream flowing over flowers as a symbol for the Fancy dominating the Imagination. The bathetic irony he employs in *Lilith* to describe the river is astonishing. His primary technique is the selection of superfluous, inept and banal adjectives, accompanied by skilfully misused alliteration. The final version has: “With silent, radiant roll, the river swept onward, filling to the margin its smooth, soft, yielding channel . . . the delicate mass shone with the pale berylline gleam that ascended from its deep, dainty bed” (260). The aptness of “pale berylline” highlights the bathos of the other adjectives. The version in “E” begins with double onomatopoeia that MacDonald apparently decided was too ironic, but otherwise its bathos is less evolved: “The river rushed with silent, radiant roll, filling to the margin its smooth channel, [it] shone with a pale berylline gleam sent up from its bed of grass and flowers” (378). “D” ends “from its grassy lining” (195). Continuing to work backwards through the drafts, the ironic bathos dwindles to nothing.²²

In “A,” a great stair extends on arches over the city to the gates of the palace, an image calling to mind nothing so much as the arches across the bowges in *Inferno* cantos 18-30. In “B” the description is similar and describes how, when the stair “reached the ever open gate of the city, [it continued] over the gate and over the tops of the houses.” But there seems to be confusion in both these drafts when the children, within the outer court of the palace, are at the same time in the city streets. In subsequent versions, the stairway on arches and the palace it leads to are both omitted. The description of the outer gate of the palace then serves to describe the entry gate to the city.

A woman sitting at this open gate is described in “A” as: “An angel, as like Alberte Dürer’s *Melancholia* as she could look.” In “B” the description is simpler: “A woman angel, with her brow leaning on her hand, as if she brooded on something she could not understand.” In “C,” “she could not understand” is omitted and in “D” and “E” it is replaced by “on some perplexity.” In “F” there is again more detail. She is described as “the porteress, a woman-angel of dark visage, who sat leaning her shadowy brow on her idle hand, brooding.” In the final version “shadowy” is improved to “shadowed” but “brooding” is

surprisingly omitted. Greville MacDonald, in his biography of his parents, tell us that his father possessed “a facsimile of the original *Jerusalem* (555). Plate 53 of Blake’s *Jerusalem*—the beginning of chapter 3 addressed to “The Diests”—includes a famous picture of Vala as guardian of the false *New Jerusalem* looking astonishingly like Durer’s *Melancholia* except that she rests her head on both hands.²³

The next “angel” the party encounters is equally formidable and, if anything, more evil, as his name in the “A” draft, *Cacourgos Heteros*, confirms.²⁴ He is colonel of the guard of the city. In the final version he is called first “great angel” then “mighty angel.”²⁵ His subordinate “angels” fetter the children and take them away. It is true they are fettered in what MacDonald calls “heavenly arms,” but in this situation the “arms” are unlikely to be truly “heavenly,” and “fettered” is troubling. In “B” the wording is stronger: the children are “imprisoned in the dungeon” of the “angels” arms, a stark contrast to “A” where the (very different) children are taken away and fed and put to bed.²⁶

MacDonald’s development of ambiguity in successive drafts in the comment of this “mighty angel” about the use he plans for the Little Ones is astonishing. In “A” the “angel’s” comment is “Ah! it is good. I wanted another corps of infantry to send against a certain army of black bats that I hear of on the outskirts! These will make short work of them!” The pun in “‘infant’ry” is probably intentional, as foot soldiers would be of limited use against bats. In “C” MacDonald has “I hear of an army of black bats on the outskirts of the human world! These will serve me well!” The subjects of “these” are ambiguous. In “D” the ambiguity is developed further, although the second “of” is less ambiguous than “with.” “These are the soldiers to take heaven itself by storm! I hear of an army of black bats . . . These will make short work of them!” In the final version the bats are again “on the frontiers” of the city, not menacing the Earth (and presumably not menacing this “New Jerusalem” either), and the wording returns to “make short work with such.”

Vane goes on to quote *Purgatorio* 2.30 to express how he feels “thus received by the officers of heaven.” This *Purgatorio* passage describes where Dante sees his first angel. Sayers translates the line MacDonald quotes as: “Henceforth thou shalt see many of these great emissaries.”²⁷ With such characters—apparently the “sneaking serpent” and the “villain” of Blake’s *Marriage* plate 2—in charge of the city, it is little wonder that there is “a horde of black bats” around and that the colonel hopes to enlist the bats to work with his child conscripts, or, equally possibly, to destroy these children.

In “A” five city gates seem to be mentioned. In “B” to “E” there are two,

and only one is mentioned in the final version. Where Vane pauses to admire the stones of which a gateway is constructed, MacDonald, at long last, describes Platonic archetypes. His brief but beautiful description is gradually perfected through the drafts. In “A” Vane is unable to be precise, but knows that although “what it was made of [he] could not tell . . . it had something to do with what the sunrise is built of.” After this, the vision builds up to the final version where Vane describes how: “I saw the prototypes of all the gems I had loved on earth—far more beautiful than they, for these were living stones—such in which I saw, not the intent alone, but the intender too; not the idea alone, but the imbodier present, the operant outsender.”²⁸

Beyond the gate there is “no wall on the upper side, but a huge pile of broken rocks” (262), which in “A” Vane and his father must ascend alone. This again vividly brings to mind the image of Dante’s Malbowges, and specifically here his and Virgil’s climb out of Bowge six in *Inferno* 24, 19-44, climbing up to descend even deeper into Hell. Ambiguously in “D” and more clearly in “E,” “F” and the final version, MacDonald describes steps above the tumble of rocks. They are of ivory in “F,” perhaps an inversion of the true New Jerusalem’s gates of pearl, and they suggest a use for the elephants Vane has brought with him. The top of the steps is shrouded in cloud, but Vane surmises that they are the steps of “a grand chair.” This becomes “a grand old chair, the throne of the Ancient of Days” in “F” and the final version. There is no hint of the temple mentioned earlier. The postulated chair is sited high above the false New Jerusalem, just as the throne of the king-priest in chapter 23 of *Phantastes* is sited high above the Blakean decadent ‘Garden of Love.’

When Vane submitted wholly to Adam’s authority, his Coleridgian Imagination, as has been noted, began to fade. However his brief but splendid description of the gemstones of the exit-gate of the city has apparently, at almost the last moment, saved him from Adam’s ‘Heaven.’ Vane does not see what happens to Lona, but he himself is pushed “gently” by a “warm and strong” hand through “a little door with a golden lock.” This is an overt inverted allusion to the fate of Ignorance at the end of Part I of *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. Christian had previously ranted at Ignorance for his reliance upon Imagination:

“Every imagination of the heart of man is only evil, and that continually” (Gen. 6.5.). And again, “The imagination of man’s heart is evil from his youth” (Gen. 8.21). (174)

Now Vane finds himself alone in his library. He has been saved by his imagination, although he cannot yet grasp this.

There is a further reason for the allusion to the fate of Bunyan’s character

Ignorance at this point in *Lilith*. Robert Trexler lists striking parallels between Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Blithedale Romance* (1852) and *Lilith* (37-38). One parallel he does not note is that between MacDonald's Adam as "Adam" and the character Hollingsworth in *The Blithedale Romance* (which was initially titled "Hollingsworth"). Hollingsworth is a skillfully manipulative and intensely religious person (36). His one fixed idea is to establish idealist rehabilitation communities for criminals—but these would be communities where he had absolute authority over every detail. Furthermore, he is prepared to manipulate the emotions of anyone and everyone whom he meets in furtherance of this "ideal" (53).²⁹ MacDonald's Adam perceives everything from the same religio-materialistic, authoritarian-philanthropic viewpoint as does Hawthorne's Hollingsworth. What is most interesting about the Bunyan allusion appearing at this point in *Lilith* is that Hollingsworth becomes a broken man after being responsible for the suicide of the heroine Zenobia and, commenting upon this at the end of the penultimate chapter of *The Blithedale Romance*, the narrator Coverdale remarks, "I see in Hollingsworth an exemplification of the most awful truth in Bunyan's book of such:—from the very gate of Heaven there is a by-way to the pit" (224).

An energetic critic could probably put forward a plausible refutation of several images out of the extraordinary assemblage of ironic images in *Lilith* chapter 46. But MacDonald has ensured that the quantity and quality of these images prevent any overall refutation of their existence. Nearly all critics simply ignore them, and he probably anticipated this. People had been doing the same with the ironic ending of his romance *The Portent* ever since it was published in 1864. It was noted above that in chapter 43 of *Lilith* Vane alludes to the mad Duncan Campbell's words in *The Portent*. Vane's last words in the final version of *Lilith* reflect Campbell's last words in the version of "The Portent" in *The Cornhill Magazine* (as Wolff notes), and additionally Campbell's words at the end of chapter 16 of *The Portent* (1864) immediately before the extension of his narrative where he fantasises about rediscovering his Alice (Docherty, "Madness" 21).

At the end of the end of *Lilith* in chapter 47, there is (except in the "A" and "B" drafts) no mention of anyone with Vane in his house except the allegorical Hope, and Mara as an equally allegorical figure of Care much like the *Sorge* who is with Goethe's Faust in his last days (*Faust II* line 11420 *et. seq.*).³⁰ Hope's questioning of Vane seems positive, but it leads him to say: "When a man dreams his own dream he is the sport of that dream; when Another gives it to him that Other is able to fulfil it" (263)—and any distinction between these

two types of dream is tenuous. Vane seems as bemused as is Faust during his last hours. Prickett points out that Vane “is not returned to his attic mirror. . . but to his library—to the world of books where the collective learning and spiritual experience of others is assembled. That is where this journey into self exploration must now continue” (“Death” 168). Yet such exploration seems even less likely now than when Vane was last consciously in his library at the end of chapter 43 and saw his books as hateful.

Then, however, Vane’s despair leaves him. He comes to accept that the hand which sent him back was benign, and in a beautiful closing passage he is able to associate his experiences “with the much wider mysticism of Plato that has found echoes in the intuitions of a minority in every age of our literature” (Prickett, *Victorian* 170).³¹

Endnotes

1. Thirty lines have been omitted from this quotation. All are important and relevant to *Lilith* and four of them are, in fact, quoted later in the present paper.
2. Romantic irony, as defined by Frederick Schlegel, “is the irony of love. It arises from the feelings of finiteness and one’s own limitations and the apparent contradiction of these feelings with the concept of infinity inherent in all genuine love” (in Behler 45)
3. For MacDonald, as for his friend Lewis Carroll, the age 42 begins the seventh age of life, when a person should be able to begin to act as an integrated individual in the world. His protagonist Anodos in *Phantastes* is half this age,
4. Vane states: “At length, however, I did have a dream concerning the house of the dead and something else, with which I shall end my narrative. My reader may leave my book here if he have read thus far, for what follows is only a dream” This very important sentence was first noted by Roderick McGillis (“George MacDonald” 51).
5. U.C. Knoepflmacher points out that MacDonald “tries to encourage his . . . readership to distrust surfaces he always tries to ruffle” (xv). Knoepflmacher is referring specifically to *Adela Cathcart*. In other books, including *Lilith*, MacDonald does far more than ruffle the conventional surfaces of things. Reversing the metaphor, many (probably most) of MacDonald’s stories are so profound that their depths are not perceptible at a superficial level. These depths can be discovered, as MacDonald’s close friend John Ruskin expresses it, only “if you are already hard at work in bettering yourself; and when you are bettered by them it shall be partly with a general acceptance of their influence, so constant and subtle that you shall be no more conscious of it than of the healthy digestion of food; and partly by a gift of unexpected truth, which you shall find only find by slow mining for it” (*Queen* I.17). MacDonald explains how this slow mining should be directed towards discovering “the spiritual scaffolding or skeleton” of a story and explains why that is so essential (*Dish* 38). Many readers today would dismiss this as reductionism, but it is the antithesis of reductionism.
6. Wolff’s suggestion that MacDonald has “lost control of his imagery” is an astonishing claim for a work that was revised so extensively over a period of some four

years. Probably most people would agree that the “A” draft, for all its faults, is superior as a work of literature to the final version. But the same is true of nearly all the poetry that MacDonald revised for subsequent editions, such as his Novalis translations. He felt that his revisions achieved greater clarity of meaning, and this is antithetical to losing control of one’s material.

Any accusation of MacDonald having “lost control of his imagery” applied to the “A” draft would be even more completely meaningless. MacDonald knew that if one meditates intensely on the ideas one wishes to incorporate in a story—meanwhile devising an appropriate plot-vessel to contain these ideas—and then writes very quickly, this allows archetypal images to be released from the sub-conscious. The “A” draft of *Lilith* was very obviously written at great speed for this reason. With this technique, some unwanted material will almost inevitably arrive along with the mythopoeia. But MacDonald either deleted or altered such material very extensively for the “B” draft. For example, his exasperation with mini-minded people who could not grasp the simplest ideas he preached to them is obvious in his portrayal of the dwarfs in “A,” and he changes that episode completely for the “B” draft. Even more striking, because it clashes with the plot, is the sudden appearance of Fane’s father as the party cross the plain towards the “New Jerusalem” (384-85). This passage is deleted from “B” and subsequent drafts, although a few subsequent brief allusions to Fane/Vane’s father remain in the pica-type fragments included in “B.”

7. The “seven dimensions” appear to be successively higher regions of spiritual perception widely recognized in classical times as potentially accessible to human exploration (Docherty, “An Ambivalent Marriage”).

8. Adam’s comment as Vane lies down to “sleep” that “every creature must one night yield himself and lie down . . . Men are not coming home fast; women are coming faster” (239) would seem to be intended to mean that everyone must ultimately kill their egoism. Yet the statement makes no logical sense unless Adam is accepting reincarnation, and (except as metempsychosis) reincarnation is not mentioned or implied elsewhere by MacDonald and would seem alien to his theology. The core of Adam’s inconsistencies may be an inability to recognize that there is a distinction between killing egoism and killing the ego. That would certainly fit his personality.

9. For Blake’s crucial conception “Jesus the Imagination”, see Kathleen Raine chapter 18, which bears this title.

10. Carroll first introduced this pair in his tale “Bruno’s Revenge,” which, even before it was published, was satirized by MacDonald in 1863 in “The Giant’s Heart” (Docherty, “Literary” 93-99).

11. Kingsley seems likely to intend the unusual name “Alton” to be read as “all turn,” since, like much of Kingsley’s writing, *Alton Locke* attacks the Utilitarianism derived from Locke’s philosophy. MacDonald uses the same device for the name of his uncomprehending narrator Mr. Gowrie (‘go awry’) in *A Rough Shaking* of 1893 (Docherty, “Fantasy Animals” 46-51).

12. In chapter 10, Vane initially regarded the Bad Burrow as “a vain show”—a dire

mistake (48).

13. Vane's submission to authoritarianism here can from one aspect be understood from MacDonald's own outlook. His biographers stress how his attitude to his family was that of a laird with his clan. When, as very frequently happened, he had to console people after bereavement, his letters in these situations—such as many of those reprinted in Sadler— indicate that he felt he could not do so effectively in most cases without creating a very earthly picture of heaven. Also, when preaching, he often seems to have felt that there was no way of saving the souls of many people other than by browbeating them into obedience to God by authoritarian teaching. In his *Unspoken Sermons* elements of this outlook are mingled with the more Christian ideas he shared with Frederick Denison Maurice. With such a trait in his own character he could realistically depict Adam's authoritarianism. What in these circumstances is remarkable is how, in *Lilith*, he is able to depict religious authoritarianism so objectively.

14. By "the Father" here Vane seems to mean God, not Adam at his seventh level. There is a close parallel between Vane's despair at the end of this paragraph and Duncan's in *The Portent* (94-95). The irony in both these passages becomes evident when one recalls that, as David Robb expresses it: "MacDonald is reserved about referring to God. . .because he had that sturdy Calvinist belief in the distance between God and man—and between God and man's imagination" (99). See Docherty, "George MacDonald's *The Portent* and Colin Thubron's *A Cruel Madness*."

15. Just possibly, MacDonald, in his intense grief at the loss of his favorite daughter Lilia, may have felt (not necessarily with justification) that there was an element of eros in his love for her and so reflected this feeling in depicting Vane's growth of erotic passion for Lona.

16. To be precise, the Little Ones awaken when Adam promptly responds to the bird's cry. MacDonald employs the unusual phrase "sprang to their knees" to describe the children's awakening. It aptly conveys an attitude of joyous reverence.

17. MacDonald particularly accords a place to domesticated animals in heaven. He realized that domestic animals grow in individuality through positive contact with humans. So, predictably, Vane later sees his "white pony, that died when [he] was a child" amongst the creatures in the clouds above the "New Jerusalem" (260). Ideas about the spirituality of the higher animals are important in two of MacDonald's works published in the early 1890s, *A Rough Shaking* and *The Hope of the Gospel*, but apparently he had always held such ideas. They appear at their most astonishing in Thomas Wingfold's sermon in chapter 27 of *Paul Faber Surgeon* (1879), a sermon popularly supposed to be based upon one delivered by MacDonald when a minister at Arundel many years before. There he states, "I more than suspect a rudimentary conscience in every animal. I care not how rudimentary." And he goes on to claim, in the next-but-two sentence, "one may see betwixt boys at the same school greater differences than there are betwixt the highest of the animals and the lowest of the humans" (174). This view seems to be grounded in the belief that conscience is instilled by discipline imposed from without by a higher power.

18. MacDonald additionally seems here to be parodying a passage from Lewis Carroll's *Sylvie and Bruno* (1889, 213-16) where Bruno sings "Ting, ting, ting" while accompanying himself on heathland flowers (Harebells) improbably growing in a wood.

19. A few of the ironic images, however, are deleted or toned down in subsequent drafts, apparently because MacDonald felt he might have made them too overt. Such caution is remarkable, because he presumably never expected the drafts to come into the public domain.

20. *The Water Babies* satirises *Phantastes* and is in turn satirised (positively) in MacDonald's "The Golden Key" (Docherty, "Literary" 102-05; O'Connor 45-50).

21. Carroll's Bruno is magnificently articulate—an archetypal Little One—but he does slur a few words, most noticeably using "oo" for "you."

22. MacDonald employs comparable ironic bathos in chapter 10 of *Phantastes*, where Anodos describes the river down which he floats to the fairy palace (Docherty, "Literary" 46). There, MacDonald makes semi-covert ironic allusions to the beginning and end of Launcelot's journey to the Grail Castle (Mallory, *Morte d'Arthur* 17. chs. 13 and 15). The fairy palace Anodos reaches potentially could become a true Grail Castle. Vane reaches what had once been a true New Jerusalem,

23. This resemblance is not evident in the only colored copy of *Jerusalem*, now the one usually reproduced in facsimiles. Earlier in *Lilith*, (143-44) Vane and Lilith act out a scene depicted on plate 2 of Blake's *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, where a prototype of Vala tempts a young man to climb a tree for her (Docherty in "Ambivalent"). So it is unsurprising that MacDonald should now use another of Blake's Vala images.

In *The Princess and the Goblin* (1872), by contrast, MacDonald draws upon Blake's illustration at the head of his chapter "To the Christians" in *Jerusalem* (pl.77) depicting a girl following a "golden string" that will lead her "in at Heavens gate."

24. MacDonald, as noted above, is in general careful not to reveal more than he feels necessary in his drafts, but with the angel's name here he relaxed his guard.

25. Devils are of the same spiritual nature as angels but have "fallen" or been "retarded." This devil-angel is not in the least like the "devils" described in Blake's *Marriage*.

26. In "A" the children are children of the dwarfs and wholly different from the Little Ones of subsequent versions. Yet they too are compulsorily enlisted without any option by the colonel of the guard.

27. This suggests that there may be more irony in MacDonald's previous Dante quotation about "sweet tin-tining" than at first appears.

28. This lucid description of the "prototypes" alludes to Rev. 21. MacDonald was a lover of gemstones.

29. Hollingsworth's manipulations extend to Old Moody's daughters by different mothers, and the younger daughter has endured a life of suffering.

30. Hope and Care are likewise incongruously present in Carroll's poem *The Hunting of the Snark* (1876). Like Vane, the group of questers in that poem fail in their quest, but through this all but one are saved. The hero, the Baker, does encounter the Snark, at that moment vanishing out of the world the others inhabit—and not, it would seem, into

another.

31. Prickett is referring to MacDonald himself, but here at the end of *Lilith* his remarks also become appropriate to MacDonald's creation Vane, who has at last become consciously aware of the wind of the Spirit.

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