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Lilith and Mysticism

Charles Beaucham

G. K. Chesterton once wrote of George MacDonald that he would come “to be more carefully studied as a mystic . . . when people discover the possibility of collecting jewels scattered in a rather irregular setting” (13). The canonical documents of Christian mysticism are mostly philosophical treatises, sermons, and books of spiritual direction. As Chesterton implies, MacDonald’s mysticism is not primarily presented in such traditional forms. His jewels of mysticism are to be found scattered about in his works of fiction as well as his sermons. MacDonald has often been referred to as a mystic, yet there are few studies that take an in depth look at this essential component of his character and work.¹ In his book-length study on MacDonald, Richard Reis devotes a few pages to his mysticism, putting his art and personality type in the context of the Christian mystical tradition using Evelyn Underhill’s study of mysticism. Building off of these connections, I will interpret MacDonald’s masterwork *Lilith* as a mystical narrative, using the writings of Meister Eckhart, one of the more readily acknowledged mystics of the Christian tradition, as my primary interpretive tool. In this paper I will argue for both a mystical understanding of MacDonald’s creation of *Lilith*, and that examining the novel in the context of the Christian mystical tradition serves to illuminate the novel’s enigmatic symbols, particularly the symbol of sleep.

Ergotrophic vs. Trophotropic

One of the primary claims that I will be making in this paper is that *Lilith* should be viewed as a mystical narrative in which the teachings of the world’s great mystical and contemplative traditions are symbolically illuminated. In order to make my point clear, I will first have to discuss the relationship between visionary mystical (ergotrophic) experiences and non-visionary, contentless experiences of consciousness which scholar of mysticism Robert Forman calls trophotropic experiences.

In his book *Mysticism, Mind, Consciousness*, Forman distinguishes between mystical experiences without mental content and visionary experiences. Forman endorses Ninian Smart’s definition of mysticism: “Mysticism describes a set of experiences or more precisely, conscious

events, which are not described in terms of sensory experience or mental images” (qtd. in Forman 6). According to Forman, mysticism is essentially what he calls a pure consciousness event (PCE) (11). Forman describes the PCE as “a state in which there are no thoughts, no sensations, no cognitive content: a nonintentional yet wakeful moment” (15). Forman uses the writings of Meister Eckhart, Eastern spiritual masters, interviews of contemporary contemplative practitioners, and his own experiences to make his case for the existence of the PCE. All of these sources report accounts of experiences of pure consciousness, usually encountered during contemplative practice, which they can only reflect on afterwards or on the edges of the experience. All report feeling to some degree revitalized by the experience of nothingness, their experiences ranging from ecstasy to the mysterious dissolution of former problems, to a renewed love and interest in life and other people (Foreman 27-30).

Such evidence suggests that there is some universal, unconditioned, unconstructed experience from which the phenomena of existence acquire their significance and meaning as they are perceived and evaluated in our minds; the mysterious, inscrutable source to which all words and concepts ultimately defer. Forman quotes Eckhart to describe this experience: “There is something in the soul in which God is bare and the masters say this is nameless, and has no name of its own . . . God is always present and within it. I say that God has always been in it, eternally and uninterruptedly” (qtd. in Forman 146). Without the mysterious interaction with this source, cognitive contents (ideas, concepts, perceptions) are merely rootless signifiers.

To say that a fantasy novel like *Lilith*, consisting of visionary symbols and a certain pattern of events, should be studied as a mystical document might seem inconsistent with the definition of mysticism given by Foreman, but it is precisely my argument that trophotrophic states are vitally related to the ergotrophic visionary experiences which Foreman excludes from his definition of mysticism. Visionary symbols can, to a significant degree, communicate the supersensory experiences of transcendental reality experienced in trophotrophic states. MacDonald himself was keenly aware of the imagination’s ability to spontaneously translate the power of such experiences into the symbolic language of myth as well as its superiority in doing so in comparison to systematic theology or philosophy:

In very truth, a wise imagination, which is the presence of the spirit of God, is the best guide that man or woman can have; for it is not the things we see the most clearly that influence us

the most powerfully; undefined, yet vivid visions of something beyond, something which eye has not seen nor ear heard, have far more influence than any logical sequences whereby the same things may be demonstrated by the intellect. (“The Imagination” 28)

In somewhat paradoxical language, MacDonald speaks of a vision which “no eye has seen nor ear heard.” He is, of course, talking about the inner vision of the imagination which has the ability to translate the supersensory experience of pure consciousness into symbols. The power and transcendent wisdom inherent in such experiences can be, at least to a certain extent, embodied and communicated through the imagination’s “undefined yet vivid visions of something beyond.”

In Evelyn Underhill’s landmark study *Mysticism* (1911, published only six years after MacDonald’s death), various types of visionary experiences in the history of Christian mysticism are outlined and categorized. Underhill regards visionary experiences as, at least some times, the mind’s uncontrived, spontaneous representation of truths directly encountered in supersensory experiences:

It is really a visualized poem, inspired by a direct contact with truth. Of the same kind are many of those reconstructions of Eternity in which mystics and seers of the transcendent and outgoing type actualized their profound apprehensions of reality. (286)

Unable to directly communicate his or her unmediated apprehensions of transcendent Reality, the mystic as artist can use symbols to mediate truths directly encountered in supersensory experience to his or her fellow humans. It is true that the mystical artist uses the contents of the mind to communicate a supersensory experience of reality, but as Underhill goes on to say, the symbols used by the mystic have their foundation in an unconstructed experience of reality:

Such a vision, that is to say, is the “accident” which represents and enshrines a “substance” unseen: the paint and canvas picture which tries to show the surface consciousness that ineffable sight, that ecstatic perception of good or evil—for neither extreme has the monopoly—to which the deeper, more real soul has attained. The transcendental powers take for this purpose such material as they can find amongst the hoarded beliefs and memories of the self. (271)

In his sermon “The New Name,” MacDonald describes his own favorite mode of expression as he discusses the mystical symbolism of the writer of the book of Revelation in strikingly similar terms as Underhill:

A mystical mind is one which, having perceived that the highest expression, of which truth admits, lies in the symbolism of nature, and the human customs which result from human necessities, prosecutes thought about truth so embodied by dealing with the symbols themselves after logical forms. This is the highest mode of conveying the deepest truth. (*Unspoken Sermons* 67).

In *Lilith*, MacDonald’s most intriguing symbol is just such a human custom resulting from a human necessity: sleep.

To the mystic, vision is “the violent effort of the self to translate something impressed upon its deeper being, some message received from without, which projects this sharp image and places it before the consciousness” (Underhill 269). The symbols which are involuntarily presented to the mystic’s consciousness have an autonomous quality to them, appearing as rejuvenating stimulus from outside the incomplete conscious personality. Underhill explains:

Where, however, artistic “automatisms” spend themselves upon the artist’s work, mystical “automatisms” in their highest forms have to do with that transformation of personality which is the essence of the mystic life. They are media by which the self receives spiritual stimulus; is reproved, consoled, encouraged and guided on its upward way. (272)

Underhill quotes Delacroix to further her point. “Such automatisms as these . . . are by no means scattered and incoherent. They are systematic and progressive: they are governed by an interior aim; they have, above all, a teleological character” (273). When one looks over the history of Christian mysticism, it is clear that visionary experience plays a vital role in the development of consciousness and wholeness.

The PCE and Archetypes

Carl Jung goes a step further than Underhill, finding through his extensive research a set of recurring automatisms experienced in dreams and visionary experiences which can also be found in literature and religious myth. According to Jung there exists underneath our consciousness a deeper layer of unconscious content, things that we have forgotten or repressed.

Under this layer lies the collective unconscious which Jung says “does not develop individually but is inherited. It consists of pre-existent forms, the archetypes, which can only become conscious secondarily and which give definite form to certain psychic contents” (43). Jung claims that it is the conscious part’s relationship with the unconscious which regulates the vitality of the individual: “[I]t is the ‘nourishing’ influence of unconscious contents, which maintain the vitality of consciousness by a continual influx of energy; for consciousness does not produce its energy by itself. What is capable of transformation is just this root of consciousness, which—inconspicuous and almost invisible (i.e. unconscious) though it is—provides consciousness with all its energy” (142). According to Jung, the unconscious is inhabited by archetypes which are “archaic or . . . primordial types, that is . . . universal images that have existed since the remotest times” (5). These archetypes of the unconscious originate from primitive humans’ inherent need of them to deal with psychic events:

Primitive man . . . has an imperative need . . . to assimilate all outer experiences to inner, psychic events. It is not enough for the primitive to see the sun rise and set; this external observation must at the same time be a psychic happening . . . All of the mythologized processes of nature, such as summer and winter, the phases of the moon, the rainy season, and so forth, are in no sense allegories of these objective occurrences; rather they are symbolic expressions of the inner, unconscious drama of the psyche which becomes accessible to man’s consciousness by way of projection . . . The projection is so fundamental that it has taken several thousand years of civilization to detach it in some measure from its outer object. (6)

Underhill says that the mystic seeks an experience of transcendent reality. Jung would say that the mystic seeks to experience consciously an as yet unconscious transcendental level of reality in order to bring the richness of the unconscious to the conscious personality. Both Jung and Underhill agree that this process is in part affected by the mystic’s encounter with autonomous personalities within the psyche. In Forman’s study we saw that pure consciousness events leave the individual with feelings of deep comfort, joy, and often mysteriously dissolve problems. What Jung and Underhill postulate is that visionary (ergotropic) experiences are the means by which trophotropic experiences of transcendental reality have integrated into the

conscious personality of mystics, producing the same feelings of joy and comfort experienced in and after a PCE. There is a vital relationship between what Forman calls the PCE and ergotropic/visionary experience in that experiences of contentless awareness energize, inform, and inspire visionary experience. In Jungian terms, these pure consciousness events tap into the realm of unconscious bliss and wisdom, taking visible form in ergotropic experiences as the archetypes. Jung got most of his data on archetypes from not only reports of visionary experiences and dreams, but also myths and fairy tales, which he considered to be prime sources of projected unconscious content (Jung 5). *Lilith* is just such a source, being a hybrid of myth and fairy tale. We know from his son Greville that MacDonald wrote the first draft of *Lilith* in a wild frenzy of inspiration:

The way in which my father first wrote *Lilith* in 1890 is important. He was possessed by a feeling . . . that it was a mandate direct from God, for which he himself was to find form and clothing; and he set about its transcription in tranquility. Its first writing is unlike anything else he ever did. It runs from page to page, with few breaks into new paragraphs, with little punctuation, with scarcely a word altered, and in a handwriting freer perhaps than most of his, yet with the same beautiful legibility. The mandate thus embodied symbolic forms, over which he did not ponder . . . (548)

Such a creative process lends itself perfectly to the play of what Jung would call the collective unconscious. Edmund Cusick has already applied Jung's archetypes of the Shadow and the Anima to MacDonald's fantasy work. In his essay "MacDonald and Jung," Cusick explains Jung's views on literature with great clarity:

Jung divides literature into two categories. The first of these he terms "psychological." This accounts for almost all literature, both popular and literary . . . The other class of literature is the "visionary," represented by only a handful of literary works, yet amongst them are some of outstanding genius, notably Dante's *Inferno*, Blake's poetry and the second part of Goethe's *Faust*. These works are generated by the emergence of material from the collective unconscious. (63-64)

As Cusick goes on to write, "Jung's remarks on visionary art seem to describe *Lilith*." Cusick validates this claim with the Jung quotation he gives directly after this statement in which Jung describes the visionary art in detail:

It is a vision “as seen in a glass, darkly.” It is nothing but a tremendous intuition striving for expression. It is like a whirlwind that seizes everything within reach and assumes visible form as it swirls upward The poet must have at his disposal a huge store of material if he is to communicate even a fraction of what he has glimpsed, and must make use of difficult and contradictory images in order to express the strange paradoxes of his vision. (qtd. in Cusick 65)

Cusick goes on to point out that in *Lilith*, MacDonald draws images from the Old Testament, the Kabbalah, pagan myth, and European fairy tale. From what we know of MacDonald’s writing process, the dream-like narrative of the book, and the use of archetypal and mythological symbols, it seems that *Lilith* must belong to this class of literature.

How to Sleep

MacDonald’s sublime, stirring images wake us up to the deeper reality of bliss calling to us from the unknown depths of our being, drawing our attention to the activity within us going on below the mundane and often trivial aims of our day to day conscious life. If these images do indeed come from what Jung calls the collective unconscious, then their importance lies in the parallel psychic processes which they symbolize. The mystics of the world’s great religions speak technically of what MacDonald expresses through his subtle and powerful language of myth. They give us the technical guidance to take on the dauntingly obscure yet inexorably imperative task of answering the call of that which is deepest and holiest in us.

The central symbol in *Lilith* is sleep. It is clear that literal sleep is not what is demanded of Vane. The kind of sleep that Mr. Raven urges Vane to partake of is portrayed by Mr. Raven (whom MacDonald invests with complete moral authority and perfect knowledge) as essential to Vane’s spiritual development. Without this sleep, he is repeatedly told, he will remain in ignorance and moral immaturity. Mr. Raven goes so far as to say that, compared to the quality of existence Vane could gain through sleep, he is now dead, and will be dead so long as he refuses to die the death of this peculiar sleep. Mr. Raven implies that not only will sleep bring right knowledge, but it will give Vane access to the bliss at the heart of the universe. What, then, in the context of human life, is this sleep?

The Medieval German mystic Meister Eckhart is perhaps our best guide to understanding what sleep is and how one sleeps. To sleep, Eckhart

would perhaps say, is to have perfect “Abgeschiedenheit,” usually translated as detachment or disinterest. According to Eckhart, perfect disinterest is the perfect poverty of spirit needed to become one with the source of our life, which he calls God:

I have often said, and great authorities agree, that to be a proper abode for God and fit for God to act in, a man should also be free from all [his own] things and [his own] actions, both inwardly and outwardly . . . For God does not intend that man shall have a place reserved for him to work in, since true poverty of spirit requires that man shall be emptied of God and all his works, so that if God wants to act in the soul, he himself must be the place in which he acts—and that he would like to do. (230-31)

Eckhart praises disinterest even above love:

The best thing about love is that it makes me love God. Now, it is much more advantageous for me to move God toward myself than for me to move toward him . . . He is more able to deal with me and join me than I am to join him. Disinterest brings God to me and I can demonstrate it this way: Everything likes its own habitat best; God’s habitat is purity and unity, which are due to disinterest. Therefore God necessarily gives himself to the disinterested heart. (82)

This is what Mrs. Raven means when she tells Vane that he must sleep “heartily, altogether and outright” (45), to the extent that he would not even trouble himself about waking. Although it must feel like the death of oneself to practice such a complete disinterest, it is a deep hunger for life which leads one to it. Mythologist Joseph Campbell expresses this brilliantly in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*:

Willed introversion, in fact, is one of the classic implements of creative genius and can be employed as a deliberate device. It drives the psychic energies into depth and activates the lost continent of unconscious infantile and archetypal images . . . it is a deliberate, terrific refusal to respond to anything but the deepest, highest, richest answer to the as yet unknown demand of some waiting void within: a kind of total strike, or rejection of the offered terms of life, as a result of which some power of transformation carries the problem to a plane of new magnitudes, where it is suddenly and finally resolved. (64-65)

This practice is not to be confused with a total detachment for its own sake in which one uses psychological techniques to avoid dealing with life; rather, it is the disciplined technique of silencing the lesser desires that the deeper, richer desires will surface in their stead. In actuality, through this practice of disinterest and desirelessness, Eckhart writes, “the soul is unified, knowledge is made pure, the heart is kindled, the spirit wakened, the desires quickened, the virtues enhanced” (90).

Although in less technical language, MacDonald, throughout his works, stresses the necessity of embracing silence as a means of reorienting oneself towards God. In her work on MacDonald’s theology, Kerry Dearborn, using some of MacDonald’s own phrases, explains his belief in the importance of times of silence:

MacDonald pictured each person with a door of escape from the outside, which leads inside to the place of “profound repose of perfect love.” This door is “haunted with the knockings of the hand of Love” who beckons one into a realm of “infinite quiet, not the solitude the wounded spirit imagines. Least of all a waste, for there the silence itself is God.” When God’s creatures enter or even look into “these regions of silent being where God is . . . the fountain of their life springs aloft with tenfold vigour and beauty.” (124)

Dearborn goes on to point out that

[e]ntering into silence and solitude with God is like Tangle’s bath in “The Golden Key”: “she began to feel as if the water were sinking into her, and she were receiving all the good of sleep without undergoing its forgetfulness. She felt the good coming all the time . . . All the fatigue and aching of her long journey had vanished. She was as whole, and strong, and well as if she had slept for seven days.” Similarly, God’s presence offers cleansing, healing, and Sabbath rest . . . Times of solitude and silence include elements that correlate with baptism, dying, and rising. (124)

Such a time of silence empties us of all that is not God. We allow ourselves to sink into the nothingness in order to be filled with the fullness of God.

Although their respective modes of expression differ, it seems that MacDonald and Eckhart are talking about the same thing and each view the practice of silence as profoundly important. Again and again in his writings Eckhart emphasizes the infinite extent of the sleep of disinterest, in which

“when disinterest reaches its apex it will be unaware of its knowledge, it will not love its own love, and will be in the dark about its own light” (89). It is, indeed, a total and complete act of self negation leading to a complete revitalization of the true self in God, which necessarily puts at least the total act of sleep beyond the reach of human volition. Just as one is not truly asleep physically if one is conscious that one is sleeping or is actively maintaining a state of sleep, so also is one not fully disinterested if there remains a spark of self consciousness or calculated intention. One can begin to think about these experiences on the edges of them, that is, as one comes down from the high. One can also remember them afterwards, but in a perfect experience of union any self reflective awareness of the experience is absent. This is why Vane could not choose to sleep even when he wanted to; however, his willingness to sleep is the first step to fully sleeping. One can, and must be willing to, be fully disinterested, but one cannot make it happen all of a sudden. It can be encouraged and worked toward, but not achieved. Contemplative Psychologist Gerald May uses the words of St. John of the Cross to emphasize the role of grace in the process:

Saint John of the Cross [refers to] the entire spiritual life as well as meditation when he says, “In order to arrive at being everything, desire to be nothing. In order to arrive at knowing everything, desire to know nothing.” This is one of the most important themes in contemplative spirituality: the notion that you cannot do it, you cannot make it happen, you cannot achieve it . . . though we may incline ourselves in the direction of such experiences, it is impossible to make them happen. (37)

Vane’s greedy desire for sleep is only another aspect of his willfulness keeping him from sleeping completely. It seems that it is primarily a passive process which Vane must merely cultivate a willingness to undergo.

The rich, multifaceted symbol of sleep is not merely an allegory for the practice of contemplative introversion; rather, the essential experience of pure consciousness is what is symbolized by the perfect death which the sleepers in Mr. Raven’s cottage are dying into. The practice of contemplative introversion could be looked at as one interpretation of the multi-layered symbol of the ever deepening sleep; however, the symbol of sleep must also necessarily represent the gradual death and purging of the self through the moral challenges and passively received influences of daily life.

Ethical Implications

MacDonald's vision of human development as presented in *Lilith* has some important ethical implications. Vane's journey is plagued with moral ambiguity. He knows that there is evil, and he knows that there is good, but he does not know what actions lead to what outcomes. He tries to help the Little Ones but only does them harm by setting a poor example for them by letting himself be dominated by the Bags and by unknowingly saving the life of their greatest enemy, Lilith. According to Mr. Raven, Vane makes these mistakes because of the one real mistake he made before, namely, his refusal to sleep the sleep.

By the second time Mr. Raven tries to persuade Vane to sleep, Vane has passed through many humbling adventures in which his ignorance and spiritual bankruptcy have been made clearer to him. When Vane learns that the Little Ones are in danger of being harmed by Lilith as a result of his own folly, he begs Mr. Raven to let him go to help them, but Mr. Raven says that he will do no good, only harm, unless he first sleeps. He tells Vane that "the fact is, no man understands anything; when he knows he does not understand, that is his first tottering step—not toward understanding, but toward the capability of one day understanding" (217). Even though Vane has been humbled by his experiences since his last meeting with Mr. Raven, his anxiousness to help the Little Ones makes him reluctant to sleep: "But surely sleep is not the first thing! Surely, surely, action takes precedence of repose!" However, Mr. Raven answers him, "A man can do nothing he is not fit to do" (219). When Vane is unable to correctly decipher the outcome of a fight between the cat forms of Lilith and Mara, Raven asks him, "How should such eyes tell who have never slept?" (220). When Vane persists in contradicting Mr. Raven in his insistence of him to sleep, Mr. Raven points out Vane's folly in believing himself alive when he is indeed dead and his refusing to remedy it, and maintains that all of his subsequent follies were the result of his original refusal to sleep. Mr. Raven gently chastises Vane, saying, "You will be dead, so long as you refuse to die . . . Be persuaded, and go home with me . . . The most—nearly the only foolish thing you ever did, was to run from our dead" (224). Vane lacks the moral vision necessary for truly inspired, dynamic action. His consciousness is too out of touch with the unconscious powers which are the foundation of his life. His conscious personality will only be capable of truly moral action when it is rejuvenated and vivified by an experience of rebirth through the sleep in which the wisdom and vitality of the unconscious symbolized by the archetypal figure of Mr. Raven will

be accessed and assimilated into his conscious individuality, a process Jung calls individuation. Even before Vane sleeps the sleep this process is already in motion as Vane encounters and interacts with the archetypes. Although it is a slow process, we do see Vane learning from Mr. Raven, who, in Jungian terms, serves as Vane's Wise Old Man. Another archetypal character, Mara, the lady of wisdom gained through sorrow, tells Vane, "Your real name, indeed, is written on your forehead, but at present it whirls about so irregularly that nobody can read it. I will do my part to steady it. Soon it will go slower, and I hope, settle at last" (106). Vane's true self grounded in God will only begin to arise when he puts to death the superficial self and its misguided aims. He neither knows himself nor the basis of his actions. They are not based on a true perception of reality. His actions are not grounded in God.

When Vane does begin to sleep, he describes it thus: "I grew continuously less conscious of myself, continuously more conscious of bliss, unimaginable yet felt. I had neither made it nor prayed for it: it was mine in virtue of existence; and existence was mine in virtue of a Will that dwelt in mine" (328). In this passage we see Vane making contact with the foundation of his life and moral authority. It is only through the willed contemplative introversion previously elaborated on that Vane can make this contact, and it is only by means of this connection that he can act morally. The kind of ideal moral action that comes from such a union with what MacDonald and Eckhart would call God and what Jung and Campbell might call the powers of the unconscious is spontaneous, uncontrived, naturally flowing activity which need not be checked by rational judgment. When Vane has been purified through rebirth, he will be able to become a vessel of the dynamic power of God. Eckhart says of such a man emptied of all things that "if God once found a person as poor as this, he would take the responsibility of his own actions and would himself be the scene of action, for God is one who acts within himself. It is here, in this poverty, that man regains the eternal being . . ." (230-31). In such a state, Eckhart asserts that "all creatures are pure to enjoy; for it enjoyeth all creatures in God, and God in all creatures" (qtd. in Underhill 206). Eckhart acknowledges that it is only God that gives him the power to love perfectly, just as Paul affirms when in Galatians 2:20 he writes: ". . . it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me." The practice of detachment is what gives one the ability to love perfectly, which is why Eckhart regards it as even more important than love. Without absolute detachment there is no perfection of love. It is only in an experience of unity

that one can act perfectly ethical. It is intention that determines the rightness or wrongness of an action, and in a state of unity one's intention is free from any taint of selfishness or egotism.

In order to revive his inner life, Vane must metaphorically die the death inherent in a pure consciousness event, abandoning all thoughts of self, all concepts, all desires. He must sleep "heartily and outright," the ultimate goal being what Forman calls the Dual Mystical State, that is, "an unchanging interior silence that is maintained concurrently with an intentional experience in a long-term or permanent way" (151). To Jung this would be the means by which the individual keeps himself constantly receptive to the nurturing forces of the unconscious. Forman uses a quotation from Eckhart to describe this kind of state of being:

In the same way, when God wishes to write on my heart in the most sublime manner, everything must come out of my heart that can be called "this" or "that"; thus it is with the detached heart. Then God can work in the sublimest manner and according to His highest will. (qtd. in Forman 150)

To truly live and to truly be ethical, Vane must establish permanent contact with his Source through giving himself over to the pure consciousness event. He must maintain the connection to God experienced in pure consciousness while still acting intentionally in the phenomenal world:

[T]he soul has two eyes, one inward and one outward. The soul's inner eye is that which sees into being, and drives its being without any mediation from God. The soul's outer eye is that which is turned towards all creatures, observing them as images and through the "powers." (Eckhart, qtd. in Forman 148)

In summarizing Eckhart's point, Forman writes, "When it is permanently established, the changeover becomes more complete. One experiences the Birth of the Son of God in the soul. Then and only then will one's actions be in accord with God's will effortlessly" (149). To the extent that we are emptied of thoughts and desires, Eckhart writes, we will be receptive to the inflow of God: "When the detached heart has the highest aim, it must be towards the Nothing, because in this there is the greatest receptivity" (qtd. in Forman 149). Vane's journey is toward such a constant state of receptivity toward God. His salvation is achieved only when his will is one with God's in perfect union. This state of ethical rectitude and spiritual vitality maintained by a constant receptivity toward God, or as Jung would say, the powers of the

unconscious, is what the ergotrophic phenomenon of the archetypes serve to establish through their powers of guidance and integration.

MacDonald's Message

As has often been noted, MacDonald is first and foremost a preacher. What, then, is his message in *Lilith*? According to David Robb,

[r]ight knowledge of death is the book's ultimate goal. When Vane first flees from the nocturnal hospitality of Mr. and Mrs. Raven, he does not fully know what it is that he is rejecting, so that his contrary impulse, after having read his father's manuscript, to take up their offer is equally ill-founded. (103)

Robb points out that even though early on in the book Vane asks Mr. Raven to let him sleep, he does not at that time understand the nature of the sleep. While understanding the true nature of the sleep is necessary for Vane, right knowledge of himself and his condition is even more essential. It is primarily because he does not recognize the extent of his own ignorance, his own incapacity for good, that he refuses to sleep. MacDonald's primary goal seems to be to convict the reader of his or her own state of moral ignorance, for, as Mr. Raven says, "when [someone] knows he does not understand, that is his first tottering step—not toward understanding, but toward the capability of one day understanding" (217). By convicting us about our own moral ignorance, MacDonald pushes us in the direction of one day being capable of right knowledge.

There do, however, seem to be some ambiguities and even contradictions in the novel concerning the precedence of sleep over action. Robb points out that when Vane refuses Adam's second offer of sleep,

Adam is dogmatic, with all the weight of the book's apparent authority behind him, that Vane can achieve nothing without first sleeping the sleep of death. Vane disobeys, however, and certainly runs into a catalogue of perils, disappointments and disasters, culminating in the death of Lona. Nevertheless, the prophecy concerning the downfall of Lilith is achieved, the Little Ones are rescued from their unknowing innocence and Vane is at last endowed with enough knowledge of rights and wrongs of the universe for him to accept death. Despite Adam's alternative advice, Vane appears to have done the right thing. (105-106)

It is true, as Robb points out, that Vane's actions do result in some good

things, but this does not change the fact that Vane acted in a state of moral ignorance and in choosing to do so, displayed his ignorance of his moral ignorance. Although Vane's choice of sleeping or acting may have no clear, allegorical equivalent in the human world, the realization that Adam seeks to bring Vane to is relevant to both worlds. By choosing to sleep, Vane would have proven himself conscious of his own condition of moral ignorance. The primary significance of Vane's adventures after both of his refusals to sleep is to bring him to this knowledge, the revelation of which is the heart and soul of the story. At the beginning of the story, in response to Mr. Raven's first invitation to sleep, Vane responds, "I am quite content where I am," to which Mr. Raven responds, "[y]ou think you are, but you are not" (28). It is to this dull sense of complacency that the book is addressed. MacDonald intends to shock the reader into self-knowledge.

The moral perfection of humans, according to MacDonald, seems to not lie in a perfect keeping of the law or in a life guided by pure reason, but in the union of desire between God and human: to desire only what God desires. Obeying moral precepts and the use of reason are certainly good and necessary, but they do not constitute true righteousness or blessedness. MacDonald shares something like Schleiermacher's, whom he read,² conception of morality in that humans are made righteous by the triumph of the God-consciousness which rules as a feeling or desire for the holy. In order to be filled with this God-consciousness, humans must empty themselves by sleeping the sleep. The problem is that one cannot solely by one's own will power put oneself in union with God. One can practice meditative exercises of contemplative introversion, but as previously discussed, these practices only serve to cultivate favorable psychological conditions for unitive experiences. How, then, does one deal with the ambiguity ridden existence of our day to day experience until one's time comes to sleep? Before Vane can sleep, he must die the small deaths brought about by the misadventures Mr. Raven abandons him to. At one point he realizes that he should have taken Mr. Raven's offer and goes back to him with the intention of sleeping. To his surprise, Vane is informed by Mr. Raven that his time has not yet come and that it is out of his control to bring about. Forsaken and utterly confused, Vane's only hope is to wander about in hope of encountering experiences which will reveal to him what he must do.

We find ourselves in the same situation. MacDonald not only gives a moral message in *Lilith* but also paints an amazingly comprehensive picture of human development in general. We can see our own experience of the

subtle complexities and ambiguities of moral and spiritual development in the journey of Mr. Vane. MacDonald conveys the sense of tragedy in the plight of the individual, who is forced to make life-altering decisions in a state of moral ignorance, while also conveying the unavoidable, ever approaching boon of bliss that redeems the tragedy, transforming it into a glorious triumph. Vane is much like MacDonald's favorite literary character Hamlet, whom MacDonald described as being a type of the human race in that he is "a man in perplexity, and yet compelled to act" (qtd. in Raeper 303). For Vane *must* act when Mr. Raven denies him sleep. Just as Vane cannot hasten his time to sleep "outright and heartily," but becomes progressively more capable of it through his journey, so must we live our lives doing the best we can with our flawed perception until our time comes to sleep "outright and heartily." Until that time we must act how we think one would act whose will was joined with God, that is, who was perfectly loving and just, denying that in us which desires to do otherwise. This exemplary person was, for MacDonald, Jesus Christ. MacDonald also says in his sermon "Self-Denial," however, that, "the time will come when [the self] shall be so possessed, so enlarged, so idealized, by the indwelling God, who is its deeper self, that there will be no longer any enforced denial of it needful" (*Unspoken Sermons* 367). In MacDonald's book of poetic daily reflections, *The Diary of an Old Soul*, he gives us a glimpse of his own struggle to apply the message of *Lilith* to his day to day life:

In such God-silence, the soul's nest, so long
As all is still, no flutter and no song,
Is safe. But if my soul begin to act
Without some waking to the eternal fact
That my dear life is hid with Christ in God—
I think and move a creature of earth's clod,
Stand on the finite, act upon the wrong. (250)

In this poem MacDonald emphasizes the importance of stifling all impulses to action that are not inspired by the deep love of union or duty. To act without proper inspiration would only yield behavior that was damaging to oneself and others. The politician who runs for office out of ambition instead of in response to a genuine calling validated by a vision of justice, and the evangelical missionary who tries to save the souls of others when he himself lacks what he seeks to share are both types of what MacDonald warns against. We are free to act and engage in the world when what MacDonald would call the Holy Spirit moves from within, but when we feel out of touch

with the source of our life, it is best to be inwardly silent and still, holding our standard of living higher than our low moods of dullness and meanness. MacDonald asserts our dependence on God for the capacity to be agents of goodness while also acknowledging our ability to use will power. It is not only uninspired moods that we must deny, but inspired moods overly tainted with ambition or some other unsanctified passion. To Vane's restlessly giddy and prideful eyes, it seems right for him to want to help the Little Ones even though he ends up causing them more harm by disobeying Mr. Raven. As Carl Jung writes, discerning moods and spirits can sometimes be rather tricky:

[The problem] which life is always bringing us up against [is] the uncertainty of all moral valuation, the bewildering interplay of good and evil . . . it is like a still small voice, and it sounds from afar. It is ambiguous, questionable, dark, presaging danger and hazardous adventure; a razor-edged path, to be trodden for God's sake only, without assurance and without sanction. (217)

It seems that all one can do is to try to do one's best with the perceptions and wisdom one is given, having compassion for one's own failings and the failings of others while continuing to seek to attain that state of perfection in which one's will is united with God's, precluding the necessity to think of duty or moral discernment.

Conclusion

In the final chapter of *Lilith*, Vane wakes back into the human world from what seems like a dream. But if it was only dream, the dream has foundationally shaken his formerly held presumptions about reality and altered his experience of it permanently. Indeed, Vane finds himself wondering which is the dream and which is the reality: "Can it be that that last waking also was in the dream? that I am still in the chamber of death, asleep and dreaming, not yet ripe enough to wake? Or can it be that I did not go to sleep outright and heartily, and so have come awake too soon?" (357). As MacDonald makes clear in the beginning chapters of the book, the realm of the seven dimensions in which spiritual reality takes on physical form is one and the same with the human world. They overlap both physically and metaphysically. This leads one to assume that Vane is both sleeping in the chamber of death, and simultaneously living in the human world. Just as prayers of the human world are birds in the seven dimensions, Vane's spiritual progress in the human world corresponds to his ever deepening

sleep in Mr. Raven's chamber. Although Vane is not gratified with the final resurrection, he is given the promise that it is coming; therefore, he waits. When he is quite dead, he will awake to live perfectly in the blissful vitality of God's very being which many mystics have claimed to have tasted in this life in the short lived pure consciousness event, and which we all have been graced with to some degree.

Because the dream of his own final waking to ultimate bliss reveals itself to have been only a dream, Vane begins to fear that it is only his mind that has constructed the most beautiful vision of life he has ever known. An internal argument against this voice commences, but Vane concludes with hope:

“Say rather,” suggests Hope, “thy brain was the violin whence it issued, and the fever in thy blood the bow that drew it forth.—But who made the violin? and who guided the bow across its strings? Say rather, again—who set the song birds each on its bough in the tree of life, and startled each in its order from its perch? Whence came the fantasia? and whence the life that danced thereto? Didst thou say, in the dark of thy own unconscious self, ‘Let beauty be; let truth seem!’ and straightway beauty was, and truth but seemed?” (357-58)

Vane comes to the following conclusion: “Man dreams and desires; God broods and wills and quickens. When a man dreams his own dream, he is the sport of his dream; when Another gives it him, that Other is able to fulfill it” (358). Vane does not try to go back through the mirror. He does not try to recreate or reconstruct his experience. He trusts that there is Another who will fulfill his heart's desire for him. Quoting Job, he says, “All the days of my appointed time will I wait till my change come” (358). He has learned that it is not individual will power that will fulfill his heart's desire. It is a Power beyond his own will that he must submit to; a Power he cannot adequately analyze or understand, but who is completely trustworthy, so trust worthy that he can abandon all thoughts of Him and still be in His bosom. Indeed, the only way he can fully know Him is to abandon all thoughts of Him, or at least to treat all thoughts of Him as incomplete intellectual tools and playthings; for he is beyond any thought, and infinitely better.

In *Lilith* MacDonald proposes that our life, be it a dream or not, has the unstable, ever changing quality of a dream, but that a good human who holds fast to truth and duty, and in doing so allows the death of his or her fleeting desires and perceptions of reality, will passively receive ever

increasingly beautiful and true perceptions of reality. It is only through the process of deconstruction that we come to know God in increasingly fuller, richer, and truer intimations. MacDonald ends the book with a quotation from Novalis: “Our life is no dream, but it should and will perhaps become one” (359). Here Novalis uses the word *dream* not necessarily in its literal sense but meaning the imagined state of fulfilled desire. MacDonald seems to be implying that there is a final state of being of constant union with God in which God’s will is fully actuated in the individual, a state of overflowing bliss that does not need to be checked or refined by a deconstructing leap into the abyss of negation. In this state, the richest powers of the unconscious accessed in a pure consciousness event would be fully integrated into the conscious personality of the individual. In *Lilith*, MacDonald shows the soul’s progression to a state in which man is fully and uninterruptedly united with the Power that actuates him.

In this essay I have sought to argue that *Lilith* was generated from an insight profoundly mystical in nature, and is itself an embodiment of the teachings of Christian mysticism, particularly in its use of the multi-layered symbol of sleep which in part represents the mystic practice of contemplative introversion. According to MacDonald, “[t]he beauty may be plainer in [a fairy tale] than the truth, but without the truth the beauty could not be, and the fairy tale would give no delight” (“Fantastic Imagination” xxiii). In examining the novel in the context of the mystical tradition, I have attempted to reveal to the mind the truth in a story so powerfully beautiful. Viewing *Lilith* in such a light has been vital to my own understanding of the novel; however, as MacDonald says, “Everyone . . . will read its meaning after his own nature and development” (“Fantastic Imagination” 316).

Endnotes

1. To my knowledge only Elizabeth Robinson has written directly about the significance of mysticism in *Lilith* in her essay “*Lilith* as the Mystic’s Magnum Opus.” Robinson relies primarily on St. John of the Cross’s concept of the Dark Night of the Soul to relate *Lilith* to the mystical tradition.
2. MacDonald uses a quotation from Schleiermacher’s *Monologues* as an epigram for chapter XIX in *Phantastes*.

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