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## Mr. Vane and Lilith: Two Roads to Repentance?

Jonathan B. Himes

There are certain literary works on my shelf that I delay reading until I feel ready to receive their full import. George MacDonald's *Lilith* was one of those. I finally read it after my thirty-ninth birthday, without looking at any critics' comments first, prepared to be delighted as I had been with my readings of *Phantastes*; I was unpleasantly surprised. This book, which was said to surpass MacDonald's other fairy-stories, seemed rather lacking in terms of character, setting, and general coherence, not to mention having a sort of double standard for its hero, Mr. Vane, that becomes quite pronounced midway through his journey.<sup>1</sup>

A number of scholars have analyzed the supposed problems of the "endless ending" of the book (Mr. Vane's expulsion from Heaven back to his dreary library leaving him in a state of Limbo), mostly in response to Robert A. Collins' perplexed invitation to investigate it as a "didactic failure" (13); Verlyn Flieger, Rolland Hein, and John Pennington, among others in the brilliant anthology edited by Lucas H. Harriman, *Lilith in a New Light* (2008), demonstrate in various ways that such an open-ended conclusion is actually appropriate, and I would agree that it is fitting for the myth of Lilith that MacDonald was "baptizing." Vane's return is not too unlike Anodos's in terms of facing the quotidian world again, but wiser and more charitable from lessons learned in the "other" world; in this case, the puzzling questions he asks about his final state in the last chapter seem rhetorical, designed to make the reader ponder the book's riddle about soul-making, a process Vane undergoes indefinitely. My analysis, however, is concerned less with the ending, which I find "normative" (didactically, at least) for a MacDonald dream narrative or fantasy, and more with the middle of the story, where the paths to repentance for the two main characters, Mr. Vane and Lilith, diverge.

For those unfamiliar with *Lilith*, the titular character is the legendary first wife of Adam (before Eve), as related in the Jewish *Qabbalah*. *Lilith* is an important novel for which MacDonald felt a divine mandate to rewrite and revise more extensively than his other works (drafts are extant in six separate manuscripts). It addresses the concerns of adulthood with a dark allegorical fantasy, just as *Phantastes* addresses those of late adolescence. Colin

Manlove writes that

*Phantastes* deals with some of the First Things; and *Lilith* with the Last. . . . The story focuses on the gradual acceptance by the recalcitrant hero Mr. Vane of his need to lie down and sleep with the dead in Adam's house so that he may waken to eternity. In a sense *Phantastes* and *Lilith* together make up a single fantasy. ("Circularity" 74-75)

Other scholars have appreciated *Lilith* for various reasons. H. P. Lovecraft praised it for a "compelling bizarrerie all its own" (46). According to W. H. Auden, "*Lilith* is equal if not superior to the best of [Edgar Allan] Poe" (vi). Tymn, Zahorski, and Boyer's historical survey of fantasy literature describes *Lilith* as a "superior work of theological fantasy" that is "both semi-allegorical and intensely literal" due to "the abandon with which it welds fantasy and theology, dream and reality, act and potency" (134).

Critics like Colin Manlove have noted many positive connections between *Phantastes* and *Lilith*, especially in terms of archetypes and dream motifs, yet their contrasting plot structures reflect each protagonist's status as either dynamic (Anodos) or static (Vane):

The "wakeful" condition of Vane throughout *Lilith* is part of the reason for that work's being more consistently connected in structure and motivation than *Phantastes*. The geography of the region of the seven dimensions is clear. . . . Vane follows a steady sequence of motive and act in a way that Anodos does not. . . . He refuses Mr. Raven's invitation to lie down in the house of the dead; he meets the Little Ones and eventually leaves them in the hope of eventually helping them. . . in their difficulties with the giants; he finds the almost-dead Lilith and revives her; he pursues her to Bulika where she feigns love for him in order to gain access to "this" world, whence she is beaten off by Mr. Raven. Once more offered death by Mr. Raven, Vane refuses and sets off on the horse of his futile passions (329-33) to help the Little Ones, but finds them already prepared, under the guidance of Lilith's daughter Lona, to do battle against the giants and set off to assault Bulika and Lilith. The latter aim results in the capture of Lilith, who eventually agrees to lie down with the dead, whereupon Vane does also. ("The Circle" 64-65)

But even though Mr. Vane retraces his steps in a spiral<sup>2</sup> sort of circularity, the plot of this work is far more linear than that of *Phantastes*, whose narrative seems haphazardly episodic and without clear progression (though each distinct adventure has a cumulative effect on Anodos of admonishing and preparing him for later ones); yet, paradoxically, *Lilith* is not quite as

readable.

It may not avail much to compare this book with other works by MacDonald since it is so vastly different, yet on the basis of sheer intelligibility I find it nowhere nearly so well composed (at least, the “final” revision published in 1896) as *Phantastes*, its companion piece. *Lilith* is written in a biblical mode of prose (as opposed to Homeric, to put it roughly in Erich Auerbach’s terms<sup>3</sup>) in the sense that much of the action is compressed into a small narrative space rather than realistically foregrounded. This mode is appropriate to the myth-laden dreams that MacDonald has composed, and is even effective for many of the chapters, especially “A Grotesque Tragedy” leading up to Vane’s recovery of Lilith’s body and the subsequent horrors of her vampirism (chapters seventeen through twenty), as well as the eventual rehabilitation of her soul, beginning in the House of Bitterness (chapter thirty-eight); I will examine these chapters below in some detail. As effective as these mythically potent portions of the story may be, however, they are marred by several defects in the prose narration, faults of wording that at times interfere with the storytelling and the mythopoeia. The greater part of this essay looks closely at these serious flaws by the author, but then demonstrates that the moral failings of the narrator, Mr. Vane, near the middle of the novel where his path to repentance diverges from Lilith’s, actually serve to redeem this important work crowning MacDonald’s oeuvre.

It seems heretical to think that MacDonald could have written anything but charming stories full of God’s own truth. But further books and articles published on this particular work confirmed my misgivings about its narrative weaknesses. According to Bonnie Gaarden, “MacDonald’s wife found *Lilith* disturbing and protested its publication,” and even his son Greville (who personally applauded it) admitted “that even fans of his father’s other work disliked the book,” as did “the bulk of contemporary reviewers” (21). The novel’s literary defects cannot be ignored. MacDonald’s spiritual insights are not in question here, but rather the flawed execution of those ideas into a visionary form somewhat comparable to what he had done so successfully in *Phantastes*. J. R. R. Tolkien, in his famous essay “On Fairy Stories,” wherein he refers to MacDonald’s fairy-tales like *The Golden Key* as “stories of power and beauty,” acknowledges that with *Lilith*, MacDonald “partly failed” (26).

Even the renowned MacDonald expert Rolland Hein writes that “the imaginative presentation of these ideas in *Lilith* tends to be disappointing, because neither evil characters nor wrong decisions have much dramatic

force or convincing power” (128). Whereas one can enjoy both the myth behind *Phantastes* and its dream-like manifestation in novel form, this cannot be said with equal relish about *Lilith*, whose myth is endlessly engrossing yet whose textual embodiment as a novel is less palatable. In other words, one can enjoy the many critical explications of MacDonald’s myth of *Lilith* written by scholars, but the experience of reading MacDonald’s novel itself can be less than riveting. Lewis has written that no writer has surpassed MacDonald in terms of creating new myths in the modern era (*Phantastes* x), yet the texture of MacDonald’s prose “as a whole is undistinguished, at times fumbling” (ix). In the case of *Lilith* it is especially so.

In several places the narrator simply compresses so much that he fails to give the reader a plausible, or in some cases intelligible, thread of story that can be followed. For example, it is not clear at times which leopardess (the spotted or the white) the narrator refers to, as when one of them follows the Shadow in the streets of Bulika at the end of chapter twenty-two (169), but then “a huge leopard, its white skin dappled with many blots” (170) is awkwardly re-introduced in chapter twenty-three after appearing first in chapter twenty-one. Granted, MacDonald is introducing these loping beasts by degrees to retain an air of mystery so that readers will discover along with Vane which one is righteous and which evil long after the gothic horrors of the novel have had a chance to work on the imagination. But even conceding this, the narrative could use a bit more coherence.<sup>4</sup>

Similarly confusing are the worms that Raven flings up in the air, transforming them into dazzling “bird-butterflies,” which have no clear connection to the sleepers in Adam’s House of the Dead, or even those he allows to “sleep” on the moors as plentiful as leaves (49); the “glorified” worms seem to remain a separate allegorical detail unto themselves, culminating with Vane’s attempts to possess their beauty that results in their devolvment into dead books (recalling similar episodes of Anodos trying to seize and possess beauty for himself throughout *Phantastes*), though these creatures transformed by the sexton seem to be referenced in the vision of Heaven near the story’s end (“‘I see that serpents grow birds here, as caterpillars used to grow butterflies!’ remarked Lona” (353).) One cannot help sympathizing with the otherwise-clueless protagonist when he reacts to Mr. Raven’s excavation of such earthy creatures for skyward splendor, which is indeed marvelous but to no apparent purpose: Vane quips,

‘I see! You can’t keep your spade still: and when you have nothing to bury, you must dig something up! Only you should mind what it

is before you make it fly! No creature should be allowed to forget what and where it came from!’ ‘Why?’ said the raven. ‘Because then it will grow proud, and cease to recognize its superiors.’ No man knows it when he is making an idiot of himself. (29)

The narrator seems to be a bit hard on himself with the slight on his spiritual obliviousness in this early part of his adventure. After all, taken in a certain light, isn’t Vane expressing the theme of the novel, since the crux of Lilith’s rebellion lies in her pride and refusal to recognize her superior (the Supreme Being) who made her—that she in fact “forgets what and where [she] came from”? We may presume that the narrator is faulting Vane (himself) here for a lower meaning to his jibe—that he is thinking about class distinctions in this snarky remark, speaking from an aristocratic position over which he feels a certain insecurity and thus a desire for subordinates (sextons?) to remember their proper place, something even the saucy Hamlet did not say to his clownish gravedigger.

The early dialogue between Mr. Raven and Mr. Vane is intriguing, but it reads like a set of paradoxes that the author took delightful pains in creating, but did not succeed in presenting as plausible conversation; i.e., Mr. Vane does not always react naturally to Raven’s riddles, but at times his replies seem merely to keep the ball rolling between them:

‘You have no right to make me do things against my will!’

‘When you have a will, you will find that no one can.’

‘You wrong me in the very essence of my individuality!’ I persisted.

‘If you were an individual I could not, therefore now I do not. You are but beginning to become an individual.’ (30)

One can appreciate the profound lessons of identity that Vane must undergo, as well as the mathematical precision of Raven’s logic, worded just so crisply that the reader along with Vane must attend so closely that he may want to respond as Hamlet: “How absolute the knave is! We must speak by the card, or equivocation will undo us.” While we may admire the sharp wit on display, we may on the other hand find Vane’s objections about his individuality to sound more like cheap glue to paste the paradoxes together. At any rate, this exchange is worded much better than the earlier lesson offered by Raven: “No one can say he is himself, until first he knows that he *is*, and then what *himself* is. In fact, nobody is himself, and himself is nobody” (20), a rather clumsy if not confused way of putting it.

The best of these riddling talks, in terms of composition, is found in “A Grotesque Tragedy” (chapter seventeen) in which Vane meets Raven again, who explains to him the hellish state of the skeletal couple bickering outside the arboreal ballroom. Afterward, Vane wants to know how Raven

found him so easily, and they resume the thread about Vane's identity since Raven has "no anxiety" about *his* kind returning to Adam's realm. Here the logic and morals blend naturally—believably—with Vane's affronted inquiries. Even the back-and-forth shape-shifting of Raven seems to underscore his message about Vane not truly understanding himself as others see him, thus his identity not being eligible as the subject of conversation. Raven's final warning at the tail end of this chapter (for Vane not to do favors for one who has once deceived him) has a nice coda:

'I will try to remember,' I answered; '—but I may forget!'

'Then some evil that is good for you will follow.'

'And if I remember?'

'Some evil that is not good for you, will not follow.'

The old man seemed to sink to the ground, and immediately I saw the raven several yards from me, flying low and fast. (135)

Raven's final transformation and sureness of flight embodies the admonition he just gave to Vane, in that the evil consequences of forgetting will in fact turn out for his good, but that those same evils will not come to pass if he remembers the sage advice. The elements of reason, romance, and good writing align here and are of a piece. The mythopoeic elements are strong and effective in this chapter.

Other parts of the book rendered rather well include the strange early encounters with Raven around the estate and its library, especially the detail of the vellum manuscript wedged into the faux shelf in the closet door, the explorations through the mirror in the garret; also, Vane's resuscitation of Lilith is described well when he finds her as a desiccated skeletal figure; the intriguing detail of Lilith's fist unrepentantly clinched (though the narrative never expressly states what it contained), presumably by which the Princess keeps the land dry and all the children from growing up, perhaps formed part of Lewis's inspiration for the White Witch, who kept Narnia always in winter, hoping to subdue all life forms including the Pevensies to her rule; likewise, the mirror that Vane forswears using any more to enter that world resembles the wardrobe that led to Narnia. And Lilith's exorcism or redemption reminds one of Lewis's scenes in *That Hideous Strength*, since the guests in Mara's or Adam's houses can overhear the dire events and can feel the Presence of spiritual beings descending on the house—God's consuming fire at Mara's (286), and the Shadow at Adam's (306). Another interesting point is that Adam (Mr. Raven) is a gentlemanly sexton who quibbles with aristocrats about proper burial using a logic hard to defy: Shakespeare's grave digging clown in *Hamlet* would be pleased. As would Poe's Raven who quoth "Nevermore!"<sup>5</sup>



Unfortunately, I must turn back to my critique of the book, for most of the narrative is related in cursory fashion, as if the author were summarizing the ideas he had. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the “action” scenes such as the battle between skeletons and phantasms in “The Evil Wood”—the nebulous description “shapes” occurs five times in about one and a half pages of “leafy” prelude amongst the trees (75-77)—where we hear of only a few strokes of generic weapons but no correlative details to the dogmatic rallying cries to fight for “Truth” before the narrator moves on to resolutions or other scenes. This episode gives the impression that the author began with a moral he meant to inculcate but never fully clothed within a memorable scene, merely offering a blurry vision of internecine conflicts amongst the dead who perpetually bury their own dead; it was a good idea for this kind of book, and a site predicted by Mr. Raven where Vane would witness his grandfather fighting (64), but it remains merely on the level of a “good idea.”

I realize some of this compressed action is appropriate to the type of story MacDonald is relating—an allegorical kind of dream story. But in *Phantastes*, the dream is vivid and the images precise, as it is when one is truly dreaming and not day-dreaming. The narrator in *Lilith* himself confesses the limitations of his prose account this way:

Here I interrupt my narrative to remark that it involves a constant struggle to say what cannot be said with even an approach to precision. . . . Even this much, however, I do with a continuous and abiding sense of failure. . . . I am indeed often driven to set down what I know to be but a clumsy and doubtful representation of the mere feeling aimed at, none of the communicating media of this world being fit to convey it, in its peculiar strangeness, with even an approach to clearness or certainty. (67)

Besides the challenges of such dream-like content, there is quite a bit of awkward wording (in some cases, syntax error) to hamper things further. At the conclusion of chapter four, Vane admits that as the heir to a large property he has done little during his life to justify his existence; from there he makes a jarring series of statements: “If that world, as I now saw, had a claim upon me because I had eaten, and could eat again, upon this world I had a claim because I must eat—when it would in return have a claim upon me!” (34). Here the narrator is reflecting something of the Raven’s tone of logical paradox, which at times effectively rewards readers for having to pull themselves up short to catch the subtleties of wit. In this case, it works, but rather awkwardly. A few more samples of awkward sentences: “But she



[Lona] reflected that where birds, there the Little Ones could find habitation” (236); “It consoled Lona, however, to learn which he was, for she had been expecting him to grow a bad giant, from which worst fates death had saved him” (258); “Fearing to stand alone with the princess, and I went also sat again by the hearth” (293).<sup>6</sup>

At times, it is hard to follow even which referent the pronouns refer to: In chapter twenty-seven (“The Silent Fountain”) wherein Lilith tricks Vane into bringing her into his world, there is the sentence “She brought me through the trees to the tallest of them” (196); *she* might mean the moon since he has followed “her” throughout the tale and it was the subject of the prior sentence, but two sentences later the reader realizes it was the princess. After Lilith kills Lona in chapter thirty-six, the horses in Vane’s small army scent the blood, but in the sentence right after the one in which Lona’s horse stood simply gazing and trembling, “The boys flung themselves from their horses’ backs, and they, not seeing the black wall before them dashed themselves, with mine, to pieces against it” (263); who are *they* and *mine*? It gives pause before “horses” are understood as the referents. In chapter forty, Lilith is being conveyed across the Bad Burrow to the House of Death, but in a tussle between the white leopardess and a snake-monster that hides them in a cloud of dust, Vane’s horse bounds ahead, and then a “shapeless jelly” drops on the princess but is stabbed by a white dove, making a squelching sound as “it” falls off. “I fear she is dead!” says Mara to Eve (303), but with so much compacted action preceding it (all within just five consecutive sentences of modest length in the book), the pronoun *she* in this statement is not easy to pin down, and it takes looking at the paragraphs below and above to piece together that it is not Lilith (whose life has been hanging by a thread) nor the white dove that is meant, but the white leopardess. Due to the spare style of MacDonald’s prose, these pronouns appear rather abruptly and make a difficult text even more challenging to read, and these are but a few examples from my notes. Finally, there is a minor punctuation tic of the author that readers may find annoying: throughout the novel, there are entire paragraphs in a row in which nearly every sentence, whether of dialogue or of narration, concludes with either a question mark or an exclamation point.

This negative critique extends to many aspects of the book. Characters like the Little Ones are flat and undifferentiated, mostly speaking with one repetitive voice, choral fashion, in addressing Mr. Vane: “‘He likes our apples! He likes our apples! He’s a good giant! He’s a giant!’ cried many little voices” (80). In representing a crowd of rowdy children, it is understandable that this kind of dialogue would be employed, but it rarely goes beyond that. The few who have names like Odu or Luva have only a few lines, and we mostly have to take the narrator’s word for it

that they are sweet, cute, and lovable; Tymn, Zahorski and Boyer call them “delightful (though sometimes insipid)” (134). Roderick McGillis uses the same term, “insipid” (qtd. in Gaarden 26), in describing their leader Lona (Lilith’s daughter), to which Gaarden adds, “She is simply, blandly, good” (27). The ultimate incarnation of Evil, The Shadow that has claimed Lilith and thus the city of Bulika for its own, although innovatively described as a two-dimensional entity, is not particularly frightening or developed enough. It does not do much besides stalk in the streets. MacDonald does not offer more than sweeping generalizations about these characters to make us care.

Moreover, the whole habitat of the Little Ones is too odd for the reader to imagine in its own right (apart from the spiritual lessons that arise much later in the book), living as they do in “nests” of their own design at the tops of trees bearing tiny apples within the woods and hollows that they share with miniature elephants, horses, bears, and a confusing menagerie of other creatures. The stunted growth of these Little Ones (or “Lovers”) is aptly the result of Lilith’s withholding of water from the Land in her attempts to thwart the prophecies about children (including her own daughter) usurping the place of the adults. But other details of their peculiar antics in the bush are broadly depicted and without clear relevance. Mr. Vane is forced by the Bags (the “giants” who are simply children grown to become dull-witted, gluttonous, selfish and violent) to “scrape the bark off every branch that had no fruit on it” (84)—and that is the last and only detail given by the narrator for the “monotonous toil” (86) that occupies the protagonist for these two early chapters (twelve and thirteen) and again in chapter thirty-two when he is recaptured upon his re-entry to the otherworld.

In fact, the main problem with the initial chapters about the Lovers and the Bags is that it is so devoid of sufficient description of the “fungoid” giants and the warbling, waifish children that it is hard for the reader on first acquaintance with this book to see the relevance, after a rapid succession of gothic scenes in a hellish otherworld, of Vane’s extended stay in a rather boring place. If they soldier on, readers will discover much later in the book (chapter twenty-eight) that Mr. Raven shares their incredulity at Vane’s willingness to endure the mild bullying of his inept captors just for the sake of being near the charming Little Ones: “Indeed you almost taught the noble little creatures to be afraid of the stupid Bags! While they fed and comforted and worshipped you, all the time you submitted to be the slave of bestial men! You gave the darlings a seeming coward for their hero! A worse wrong you could hardly have done them” (202). Yes, MacDonald clearly knew what

he was about, and the book's themes do indeed cohere, but unfortunately the narrator is a bit too convincing about his own stupidity, namely due to some murky narration in certain chapters.

Even after the plot thickens, the author usually represents the Little Ones without details of incident: "Chattering and laughing and playing glad tricks innumerable at first . . ." (231), and similarly, "Many a merry but never a rude prank did the children play" (272). If he does, it rarely rises above the ludicrous, as in their "Preparation" for the attack on the city of Bulika, (chapter thirty-four), which, as implausible as it seems, sees the pampered bookworm Vane turning the cute little urchins (Lovers) into formidable warriors (Fighters):

'When you strike, be sure you make it a downright swingeing [sic] blow; when you shoot an arrow, draw it to the head; when you sling a stone, sling it strong and straight.' 'That we will!' they cried with jubilant, fearless shout. . . . 'Some of you may very possibly be killed!' I said. '*I don't mind being killed!*' cried one of the finest of the smaller boys: he rode a beautiful little bull, which galloped and jumped like a horse. '*I don't either! I don't either!*' came from all sides. (252)

Like the problem in forming a coherent picture of the Little Ones' bush country, there is not enough solidity to Bulika, apart from its generally ancient-Eastern domes and ellipsoid architecture, for it to be a plausible "city" with a commerce of gems between itself and other "cities" (no others are named), as this hellish world seems unpopulated save for the few citizens mentioned—the unnamed "woman" for instance who hatches the idea of leading the Little Ones in a rebellion against Bulika, or the unnamed "woman" who shut the door in Vane's face after offering him help. The chief obstacle to Bulika's credibility is that the only other places readers have heard of are those horrific regions traversed by Vane—the Evil Wood, the Bad Burrow, the bower of skeletal dances at midnight—places that bear no relation to "human civilization," whether or not ancient. And the Fantasy Land itself is too linear: the characters merely go back and forth through these terrains, more or less straight through them. Even though Vane does attempt to avoid these treacherous places, at least twice trying to learn how it might be done (274; 299), MacDonald could have fleshed out his world a bit more with, as Lewis would say about effective science fiction stories, the "merest sop" to our intellect in terms of plausibility (68), not just so that there would be "realistic" grounds (as well as moral ones) for traveling as the

crow (or Raven) flies, but also so that Bulika and even Adam's and Mara's houses might have a more firm hold on the imagination. MacDonald has not succeeded in creating a world in *Lilith* that is fantastic yet with what Tolkien calls "inner consistency" (46-47). It is not relatable. But that may be asking too much from a tale whose premise and theme involve dreams.

Mr. Vane's complicating circumstances in the plot are less than satisfying—specifically, when he rides off on Mr. Raven's grand horse, against the Adam-figure's numerous entreaties, to save the children on his own steam rather than first dying to self. Rolland Hein acknowledges this very same moment as one of the novel's gravest faults: "But perhaps MacDonald's most serious failure to give convincing dramatic expression to his view of the nature of evil occurs in the experiences of Vane himself, when he disobeys Mr. Raven's explicit command" (128).

Mr. Vane had been warned repeatedly and had already lived to regret his selfish choices of not lying down to die, not heeding the warnings about Lilith, and finally committing "breach of word [which] is far worse; it is a crime" (224). And all the way, he continues to acknowledge that his motives are mixed: he desires the adolescent girl Lona for his own, to be her consort in a new kingdom after they overthrow Bulika and Lilith (245-47). To his greater shame (not acknowledged in the book, but by my reckoning), he develops this attachment to her on the rebound, straight after being rejected by her mother Lilith and yet subsequently lured to bring her into his own world, desiring even then to follow her leopardess form after Adam's patient explanations of Lilith's diabolical origins and nature (lasting three chapters, twenty-eight through thirty). Not long after Vane mounts the magnificent stallion, hellish forces cut his thrill ride short, landing him back in captivity with the Bags, straight upon which he falls hard for Lona, who has all the beauty of her mother but all the innocence of the Little Ones. That trajectory alone set up this reader's expectations that Vane's selfish motives would need purging and further repentance before all was accomplished. Indeed, the narrator admits as much when he objects again to sleeping in Adam's house: "Alas, even now I believed him [Adam] only enough to ask him questions, not to obey him!" (216). His tone is even more confessional right before the attack on Bulika:

But I was supported by the thought of the coming kingdom of the Little Ones, with the bad giants its slaves, and the animals its loving, obedient friends! Alas, I who dreamed thus, had not myself learned to obey! Untrusting, unfaithful obstinacy had set me at the head of

that army of innocents! I was myself but a slave, like any king in the world I had left who does or would do only what pleases him! (255)

After he joins Lona in the sleep of death, Vane is permitted to become her love in the hereafter. In fact, it was decreed by Raven himself far earlier that they be joined together (in chapter thirty, “Adam Explains”): “You have saved the life of her . . . enemy; therefore your life belongs to her” (215). Even so, Vane remains too easily rehabilitated, and when he begins saying wise things to the children from the Battle onward,<sup>7</sup> readers continue waiting for his own moment of acquiring more of this maturity and wisdom than had yet been seen; he never seems to have suffered enough or learned enough—where is his moment of repentance? There is an early chapter (almost exactly one-sixth of the way into the novel) entitled “I Repent” that involves Mr. Vane voluntarily returning to the world within the mirror after reading his father’s manuscript and weeping that he had initially resisted the realm of Death. But Raven’s predictions of the dire consequences for his rashness never seem to materialize (in this “other” world and to Vane directly, in any case), except for some minor suffering as Mara’s cats scratch and bite at him to keep him on the right path<sup>8</sup> and of course, the loss of Lona. Vane witnesses many wonders, evoking strong emotional responses in the protagonist, but the crucial Obedience that MacDonald stresses so much in his other writings seems seriously lacking here.

Vane never seems to be confronted enough with his own vanity, and he gets away with his headstrong decision to do things his way, and not Adam’s. As Hein puts it, “Punitive suffering for sin is exclusively corrective. But even so, to be convincing, corrective experience should have a weight that more nearly matches that of the mistake. It is difficult to see these consequences as being equal to the seriousness of Vane’s disobedience” (130). In spite of expectations that the narrative sets up for witnessing still deeper trials from which Vane might truly repent, after Princess Lilith is captured (a good two-thirds of the way into the book), the focus of the story shifts from Vane’s purification and turns mostly to Lilith’s.

Though there is much to criticize on the levels of plot, characterization, and style throughout *Lilith*, the conclusion of this novel can actually be defended against the complaints of other critics, in particular those concerning Vane’s uncertainty as to whether he is now dreaming of his life back in the mundane world on earth, or whether the experience leading up to his sleep in Adam and Eve’s House was in fact a dream. In either case, Vane states in his final words, “I shall know that I wake, and shall

doubt no more. I wait; asleep or awake, I wait” (359). Some critics find this conclusion problematic, in fact, inconsistent with the design of the whole work. According to Richard Reis,

At the end of *Lilith*, after “sleeping the sleep” and experiencing some rather vague and confusing dreams and visions in the Other World, Mr. Vane is back in this one. “I never dream now,” he tells us. . . . Many readers have found this ending unsatisfactory, even perverse. Vane apparently does nothing *but* wait, evidently for death into a new spiritual beginning. He seems to have no further ambition to fight the good fight in *this* world, as elsewhere MacDonald has said we must all do, to prepare ourselves for the next. . . . Indeed, unlike Vane, MacDonald was an old man when he wrote this fantasy work; he was tired out after seven decades of effort, poverty, illness, and the loss of loved ones. (27)

Reis even goes so far as to say that this may be the one spot in the novel where the author slipped up and asserted his own feelings into the words of Vane instead of his usual mouthpiece, Raven, the voice of wisdom.

This latter point is surely wrong. Vane’s tone at the conclusion is of a man at least a little older and a little wiser after his experience in the other world, where he has learned the importance of dying to self: At the Gruesome Dance Vane reflects, “I had not yet, by doing something in it, made *anywhere* [his inherited property, for instance] a place! . . . Truly I had been nothing else in the world I had left, but now I knew the fact! . . . here I might learn to be something by doing something!” (118); he continues,

I began to learn that it was impossible to live for oneself. . . . if the author of a tale I was enjoying appeared, [I] would wish him away that I might return to his story. I had chosen the dead rather than the living, the thing thought rather than the thing thinking! ‘Any man,’ I said now, ‘is more than the greatest of books!’ (119)

He has similar meditations as he anticipates the waking to life of the skeletal figure he does not yet know is Lilith (145-46). He obtains a measure of courage when he confronts, then embraces, the white leopardess in the streets of Bulika: “She might be treacherous too, but if I turned from every show of love lest it should be feigned, how was I ever to find the real love which must be somewhere in every world?” (175). And as Vane rides to Adam’s House finally with the deceased body of Lona, he realizes her father will permit her to lie down, for unlike Vane, “she had surely died long ago! Alas, how bitterly must I not humble myself before him!” (270). If indeed Vane

has at least gained spiritual insights through extending himself on behalf of others (although making mistakes, breaking oaths, and causing worse things in the process), then the term *waiting* (regarding his spiritual status at the end) is not necessarily freighted with passive connotations but rather with the kind of moral vigilance witnessed in Christ's parable of the virgins who watch and wait with their oil lamps burning (Matt. 25.1-13), or of the faithful servants who, unlike their impatient counterparts who indulge in excess and exploit his absence, await their Master's return (Luke 12.35-46). Mr. Vane's resulting condition is not a passive state of existence, but one of alacrity, a mode of spiritual equilibrium neither impetuous nor slothful.

In fact, the ending of the novel may explain satisfactorily a (perceived) weakness in the narrative: Lilith must undergo excruciating pain (paying the uttermost farthing) before redemption, whereas Mr. Vane persists in his male bravado to the end, nearly getting off scot-free, having his grace and eating it too, aiding the children for ulterior motives so as to take agreeable Lona, daughter of disagreeable Lilith (who spurned him), as consolation prize. It is in the chapter "Adam Explains" that I believe Raven tells Mr. Vane what will be his road to repentance: "'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. . . . Neither I nor any man can here help you to understand; but I may, perhaps, help you a little to believe!'" (217). As Manlove points out, Vane does not undergo spiritual transformation like Anodos in *Phantastes* ("The Circle" 70-73). Rather than being a dynamic character, Vane's adventures prepare him for death as he shares the need of the title character (Lilith) to *face* his true identity, to own up and allow the Good Death to purge him of self-will, rather than change it. As Raven tells Lilith, "He [God] will not change you; he will only restore you to what you were" (289).

The difference in their roads to redemption is that Lilith is far more resistant and assured of her own dignity apart from God and so needs a more drastic conversion. For Lilith responds to Mara's attempts to help her repent by saying, "I am what I am" (285), nearly using Yahweh's name for himself when speaking to Moses in the burning bush in Exodus 3.1-22. Clearly this level of blasphemy reveals the depth of Lilith's idolatry of self; she has made of herself her own god. Yet her next words show just how common (and thus dangerous, when disguised in more prosaic terms) this attitude can be: "What I choose to seem to myself makes me what I am"



(285). MacDonald allegorizes Lilith's process of "making" herself what she pleases to be in chapter thirty-six ("Mother and Daughter") with a vivid scene: when faced with the threat of Bulika's invasion by the Little Ones, Lilith seeks guidance—the text says it is in fact her very mode of thinking—by enthroning herself where all other entities in her self-made kingdom fade into darkness and where only she herself can be seen in the mirror suspended above that throne, that the outcome of this or any situation may be in conformity with whatever "reality" she desires to make for herself (260-62).

The cure for this, of course, is the "roaring flame" that possessed Mara's house and invades Lilith's soul in order to separate The Shadow from her true self, enabling her to see the distinction once again and turn to Love: "But I saw the worm-thing come creeping out, white-hot, vivid as incandescent silver, the live heart of essential fire. . . . Slowly, very slowly, it crept along her robe until it reached her bosom. . . . The creature had passed in by the centre of the black spot, and was piercing through the joints and marrow to the thoughts and intents of the heart" (286-87). This "exorcism" of The Shadow allows Lilith to see herself clearly for once and admit the grievous consequences to her own soul to which her choices had led. It is a dramatization of the purification process described by MacDonald in a chapter of *Unspoken Sermons* entitled "The Consuming Fire": "If still he cling to that which can be burned, the burning goes on deeper and deeper into his bosom, till it reaches the roots of the falsehood that enslaves him—possibly by looking like the truth" (30).

The shift of the novel's focus to Lilith allows the reader to see along with Vane that in some cases, the purging of the soul may involve extreme measures, and that the divine Mercy operates on souls according to their degree of resistance, as likewise expressed in MacDonald's same sermon: "The man whose deeds are evil, fears the burning. But the burning will not come the less that he fears it or denies it. Escape is hopeless. For Love is inexorable. Our God is a consuming fire. [The evil man] shall not come out till he has paid the uttermost farthing" (31). In such cases, the individual suffering, like Lilith, cannot "see that this was the kindest thing that God could do" (*Unspoken Sermons* 27). Mara (the cat-woman) explains that only by this drastic step Lilith at last "knows that she is herself the fire in which she is burning, but she does not know that the Light of Life is the heart of that fire. Her torment is that she is what she is. Do not fear for her; she is not forsaken. No gentler way to help her was left. Wait and watch" (288).

Mr. Vane, on the other hand, does not suffer such baleful torments

since he was at least willing to die, or as Raven puts it, “At least you have not been without the desire to be of use!” (200). Unsure of who he really is apart from God, but capable of admitting it (unlike Lilith), therefore, Vane undergoes a more pedestrian, gradual repentance than Lilith’s. Perhaps part of MacDonald’s message is that no matter how important Obedience may be, even our best efforts to repent are tainted with selfish motives and a reluctance to surrender one’s self-will. Grace is our only hope, but a willingness of the soul to repent must be there to receive that grace. At the end, unsure if he dreams in Adam’s death chamber yet again of being awake back in his old house amid his old books, Mr. Vane reminds us that Mara and her “teaching[s]” are “much with me” (357): “Wait and watch.” Vane hopes of one day enjoying ecstatic re-union with Lona and the Lovers in Heaven, but for now he has accepted vigilant waiting, and dreams no more.

#### Endnotes

1. Please excuse the personal nature of my opening statements, but I wanted to make clear that this essay consists of my own observations of this important novel’s chief defects as well as merits—uninfluenced by the many negative comments of reviewers and critics that I unearthed only after recording my own findings. A version of this paper appears in *C. S. Lewis and the Inklings: Discovering Hidden Truth* under the title “Redeeming the Narrator in George MacDonald’s *Lilith*” (the version here for *Northwind* published with the permission of Cambridge Scholars Publishing). Please note that in the re-reading of *Lilith* as I revised my drafts, I found it much more profound and even enjoyable, despite the same faults of narration that I describe in this essay.
2. Borrowing Manlove’s term (“The Circle” 70), I say “spiral” due to his going “in” and “out” of doors between the worlds which add another dimension to an otherwise flat circle for the pattern of retracing his steps, multiple times, on his journey.
3. Auerbach’s first chapter “Odysseus’ Scar” in *Mimesis* makes this distinction of style.
4. It is also difficult, for instance, to tell even on a second reading whether Lilith’s spotted leopardess in the cage is a decoy (a statue in the palace, Vane first wonders in chapter twenty-five?) or if it is like a witch’s familiar, or what, since it remains chained up in chapter thirty-six, long after Lilith has shape-shifted from leopardess to woman (262).
5. Other Poe resonances include the unreliable narrator (morally unreliable for Vane, in the sense of impetuous, self-willed, and almost willfully oblivious) as well as Vane’s architectural metaphor for a troubled psyche (cf. the speaker of “The Haunted Palace”): “the house had grown strange to me! . . . The garret at the top of it pervaded the whole house! It sat upon it, threatening to crush me out of it! The brooding brain of the building, it was full of mysterious dwellers. . . . ‘I know

nothing of my own garret,' I thought, 'what is there to secure me against my own brain?' (23). Finally, the inexplicable detail of Lilith's long hair that "shone a pale gold in the moonlight" (72) but is "black as night" elsewhere (137), and the narrator's efforts to revive her to life may owe something to Poe's *Ligeia*.

6. One wonders in the last case if there was not a printer's error in this edition, for on page 168 the word "gate" is incomplete and after it a whole phrase ("as was its song") wrongly put in place of the words "A lumbering."

7. For instance, he tells the children not to worry about Mara: "You may wonder at what she does, but she will always be good" (277); likewise, he tells a boy who admits he is afraid, "There is no harm in being afraid. The only harm is in doing what Fear tells you" (278). Good advice, but how far has Vane followed it himself? The Little Ones now address him as "king," another honorific he hasn't earned, yet the narrator does not balk at this.

8. The various feline characters, especially the white leopardess, who frightens Vane but then sleeps beside him in Bulika, passing her warmth and hope to him (177), surely were the germ for Aslan as the large "cat" who performs a similar role in "Shasta Among the Tombs" in *The Horse and His Boy* (83-86).

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