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Michael Wayne Wilhelm

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Lilith's Library and Ellipsoids: Tracing the Shape of a Diabolic Mind

Michael Wayne Wilhelm

What happens when the imagination is carelessly dismissed by a disenchanted modern world? In his seminal essay, “The Imagination: its Functions and its Culture,” George MacDonald writes:

For if the whole power of pedantry should rise against her, the imagination will yet work; and if not for good, then for evil; if not for truth, then for falsehood; if not for life, then for death; the evil alternative becoming the more likely from the unnatural treatment she has experienced from those who ought to have fostered her.

(29)

Lilith is MacDonald’s fantastical exposition of this assertion. It is his cryptic masterpiece depicting a modern soul with a diabolic mind: an intellect divorced from its imagination. The novel’s protagonist, Mr. Vane, is a recent Oxford graduate who must discover and recover his abandoned imagination. MacDonald depicts the abandoned imagination as a scorned lover, and ellipsoids informed by great works of literature tell the story.

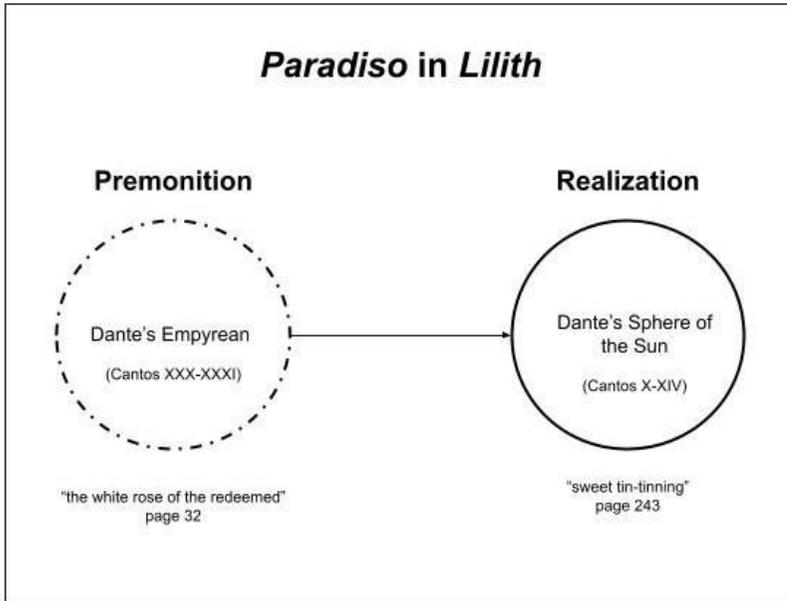
A Drama Framed by Two Luminous Spheres

Lilith is a bibliographic vision.¹ This should come as no surprise, since the novel’s central setting is a library. Dante is mentioned in a list of authors of particular interest to Mr. Vane, and the *Commedia* plays a key role in the vision (MacDonald, *Lilith* 6). After returning from his 1889

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lecture tour, MacDonald began writing *Lilith*, at least partly with the intent of providing a “loftier version of a purgatorial hell, a realm, in which no one, not even evil incarnate, would be compelled to ‘abandon hope’” (Amell 38). Thus, *Lilith*'s architecture is a masterful reworking of the *Inferno* with the help of dynamic images from Ante-Purgatory (*Purgatorio*, Cantos I-IX).²

Most peculiar regarding *Lilith*'s Dante content is the deployment of two lone references from *Paradiso*. Their special treatment is as unusual as their frequency. Unlike the artistically muted *Inferno* and *Purgatorio* images comprising the bulk of the novel, the two lone *Paradiso* images are explicit. The first reference comes from *Paridiso*'s Empyrean, as Mr. Vane compares the eyes of the sexton's wife to “a loveliness like that of Beatrice in the white rose of the redeemed” (MacDonald, *Lilith* 32). This white rose of heaven is mentioned a second time in this chapter (35), then *Paradiso* falls strangely silent until *Lilith*'s antepenultimate chapter, where the wondrous change Vane experiences at Lona's side is accompanied by the sweet sound of “tintinning” (243). Even more, MacDonald draws special attention to this second image from *Paradiso* by inserting a rare endnote, citing *Paradiso* X.142 (243).³ Thus, as MacDonald has retrofitted Dante's material for his express purposes, these highlighted images appear as luminous, spherical bookends:



These emphasized outliers from *Paradiso* can seem additionally puzzling as they appear to be out of sequence. The first, coming from the Empyrean, is located at the end of *Paradiso* (Cantos XXX-XXXI), while the final image backtracks to the sphere of the sun, located midway through *Paradiso* (Cantos X-XIV). This ordering, however, is not haphazard. The two images have been carefully chosen to show a transformation in Mr. Vane. His vision begins with the image of Dante the pilgrim gazing upon the white rose of heaven from the vantage point of the Empyrean, which is *outside* the spherical white rose. His beloved Beatrice is not by his side. Instead, she is in the sphere. Vane's vision ends with the image of the sphere of the sun, which Dante the pilgrim experiences from *within* the sphere. Here, in contrast to the Empyrean image, he stands together in union with Beatrice as its central point. The first image serves

as an important premonition, showing Vane what he must become in unity with his imagination. The second image is the realization of the premonition, where Vane is at last reunited with his abandoned imagination in the luminosity of the sphere.

The Diabolic Drama That Happens Between the Spheres

What happens in the intermediate chapters between Dante's celestial spheres? Vane discovers his abandoned imagination in the awful subcreature, Lilith. He catches his first glimpses of her in a pair of nocturnal visions. She appears in the first vision as a tormented apparition (MacDonald, *Lilith* 50), then in the second vision as an imperial specter presiding over shadowy fields of widespread violence (54). After making his way through a forest of miniature Lilliputian children and Bad Giants, Vane is retrieved by the benevolent Lady Mara who leads him to her house (77). He is treated kindly and receives hospitality: comfort, nourishment, and rest. This consolation prepares him for his arduous journey to the city of Bulika to face Lilith, its Evil Princess.

The journey from Mara's house to Bulika begins with another pair of visions. The first is an Elizabethan dance, with pairs of skull-faced dancers, "attired in a fashion as ancient as their dances" (85). As the vision begins, Vane mentions that he is "a student of Shakespeare" (85). MacDonald is telling his readers (not so subtly here) that Shakespeare is now informing Vane's bibliographic vision. The Evil Princess (i.e., Lilith) makes a cameo appearance in the great hall in the manner of Lady Macbeth (87).⁴

Shakespeare continues to inform the second vision, as Vane happens upon a pair of skeletons (89). This time the actors speak, and unlike the elegantly dressed renaissance dancers, these skeletons are wearing no clothing. They are a bickering married couple who are waking up to a nightmare of their own making. They both come from the masquerade of high society, and despite the woman's attempts at civility, the man is a boor: belligerent and unfaithful. In life he had been given to drunkenness and womanizing, and apparently, his manners haven't changed much. The drama reads like a crude imitation of a Shakespearean play, and there are allusions to *Hamlet* and *Othello*. "To be or not to be, is *not* the question," says the arrogant skeleton husband (91). He goes on to insist, "I'm not like Othello, damned in a fair wife!— Oh, I remember my Shakespeare, madam!" (92). This scene calls to mind Hamlet's culpability in Ophelia's death, as well as Desdemona's murder by her estranged spouse, Othello. In this, MacDonald is showing the husband's culpability in the skeleton couple's nightmare (despite his arrogant denials), a scene that is surely happening for Vane's benefit: Vane is seeing part of himself. He has been estranged from his imagination, and like the skeleton husband, Hamlet, and Othello, his abandonment has done her considerable harm. The skeletons have a squabble over a broken branch, an allusion to the broken willow branch that led to Ophelia's demise (92). It serves as a haunting reminder of Hamlet's offense.

Immediately following these visions, Vane discovers a lifeless, emaciated body by a stream (96). In a scene with hints of Millais' famous painting, *Ophelia* (1851-1852), Vane continually bathes the lifeless corpse in the hot stream, "holding the face above the water" (100). He revives the

body to discover she is the Princess of Bulika (later to be revealed as Lilith). It's important to notice that Vane had been using a handkerchief to help care for the princess as he nursed her back to health (98-99). The handkerchief is Shakespeare's shameful symbol of Desdemona's betrayal and demise from *Othello*. Once revived, the princess becomes a terrible enchantress. In Bulika, at her scornful worst, she punishes Vane with a handkerchief. He says, "She caught my gaze, bent down, and struck me on the eyes with the handkerchief in her hand: it was like drawing the edge of a knife across them, and for a moment or two, I was blind" (133). The "edge of a knife" simile is likely an allusion to *Macbeth*. But why would a handkerchief cause such pain? Because it is a condemning artifact from *Othello's* crime scene. The handkerchief and the princess's wasting corpse of chapter XVIII are shameful reminders that the *femme fatale* is the victim of abandonment; her wrath issues forth from her pain.

Having established her history as a victim, the Evil Princess is animated by a cataract of *femme fatale* images from great literature. She receives generous import from Lady Macbeth throughout. For example, she challenges Vane's manhood, pressuring him to prove himself "priceless or worthless!" (130).⁵ The ongoing association of the Evil Princess with menacing spots is an allusion to Lady Macbeth's famous cry, "Out, damned spot!" (*Mac*. 5.1.26-40). In her palace, the Princess is described as a gaudy reptilian vision of Keats' Lamia, wearing "a robe embroidered with argentine rings and discs, rectangles and lozenges, close together— a silver mail" (MacDonald, *Lilith* 129).⁶ She then begins seducing Vane with her stolen waters (129), an allusion to the Seductress of Proverbs 9:

Stolen water is sweet,
 and bread eaten in
 secret is pleasant. But
 he does not know that
 the dead are there,
 that her guests are in the depths of Sheol. (*English Standard
 Version*, Prov. 9:17-18)

With a nod to this biblical passage, Vane succumbs with the empty rationalization, “But what matter whence it flowed? Was not the water sweet?” (MacDonald, *Lilith* 129). The seduction taking place is heightened with images of Geraldine from Coleridge’s unfinished poem, “Christabel.” The Princess feigns devotion to Vane, then mimics Geraldine by kneeling, laying her arms across his knees, and looking up into his face (138).⁷ When she finally tricks Vane into taking her with him into his real world of three dimensions, she does so by invoking Bard Bracy’s dream of the snake and the dove from “Christabel.” She claims there is a tiny flower with healing properties that she needs atop the tallest tree in the palace courtyard. She says, “I might be a dove for a moment and fetch it, but I see a little snake in the leaves whose bite would be worse to a dove than a bite of a tiger to me!” (138).⁸ Of course the opposite is true, and the Princess is the real snake. The palace is a reptile den, but Vane’s lust has blinded him to it.

When Vane is finally tossed out of his unholy fantasy, his guide (Mr. Raven) reveals the Princess’s identity as Lilith. This revelation works its way back into the vision retroactively. Mr. Raven exposes Lilith with a poem, not unlike Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s pairing of his painting *Lady*

Lilith with his poem “Body’s Beauty” (142-147). Mr. Raven’s exposé also has strong resemblances to Apollonius’ intervention on behalf of Lycius, calling the serpentine imposter (Lamia) a “foul dream.”⁹ This parade of allusions is important, as it establishes Lilith’s wicked activity as the wrath of a scorned companion: “the evil alternative becoming the more likely from the unnatural treatment she has experienced from those who ought to have fostered her” (MacDonald, “The Imagination” 29). *Lilith* shows how the imagination not properly fostered is sure to fester.

The Shape of *Lilith*’s Diabolic Mind

Vane ultimately comes to realize that when he was in the black ellipsoid hall, he had been “in the brain of the princess” (MacDonald, *Lilith* 137)! A casual reader of *Lilith* will notice the prominence of ovals and ellipses. Among MacDonald’s many works, this is something unique to *Lilith*. This peculiar shape is first introduced by Lady Mara when she describes the reason for the dry channels in the region of the seven dimensions. She said, “The wicked princess gathered up in her lap what she could of the water over the whole country, closed it in an egg, and carried it away” (75). The *Lilith A* manuscript continues with this curious egg narrative, showing the importance MacDonald placed on the ellipsoid shape from the beginning of his project. The final published manuscript (beginning with the major *Lilith B* revision) does not develop the egg narrative any further from this point forward, and instead infuses the egg shape into the strange features of Lilith’s palace. In chapter XXV, Vane describes the palace as “a longish ellipse,” and the leopardess chained

inside has “oval spots” (125). There is “an oval aperture in the roof, ...elliptical walls, ...the roof was the long half of an ellipsoid, and the opening in it was over one of the foci of the ellipse on the floor” (127).

Why this sudden flurry of elliptical images? It's important to know that Vane has been reading James Clerk Maxwell. He says,

In the great room I mainly spent my time, reading books of science, old as well as new; for the history of the human mind in relation to supposed knowledge was what most of all interested me. Ptolemy, Dante, the two Bacons, and Boyle were even more to me than Darwin or Maxwell, as so much nearer the vanished van breaking into the dark of ignorance. (6)

Maxwell is regarded by most science experts as the greatest physicist of the nineteenth century. One of the most fascinating things about Maxwell's legacy is the first article he ever published, titled “On the Description of Oval Curves and those having a plurality of Foci”:¹⁰

[From the *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Edinburgh*, Vol. II. April, 1846.]

I. *On the Description of Oval Curves, and those having a plurality of Foci; with remarks by Professor Forbes.* Communicated by PROFESSOR FORBES.

MR CLERK MAXWELL ingeniously suggests the extension of the common theory of the foci of the conic sections to curves of a higher degree of complication in the following manner:—

(1) As in the ellipse and hyperbola, any point in the curve has the *sum* or *difference* of two lines drawn from two points or *foci*=a constant quantity, so the author infers, that curves to a certain degree analogous, may be described and determined by the condition that the simple distance from one focus *plus* a multiple distance from the other, may be=a constant quantity; or more generally, m times the one distance $+n$ times the other=constant.

(2) The author devised a simple mechanical means, by the wrapping of a thread round pins, for producing these curves. See Figs. 1 and 2. He

Fig. 1. Two Foci. Ratios 1, 2.

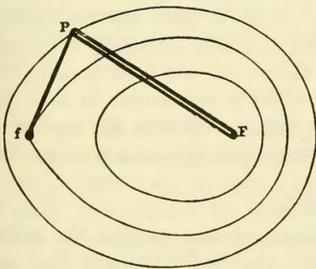
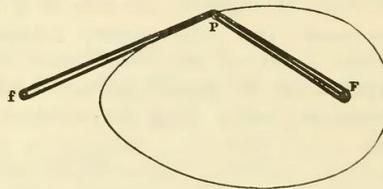


Fig. 2. Two Foci. Ratios 2, 3.



then thought of extending the principle to other curves, whose property should be, that the sum of the simple or multiple distances of any point of

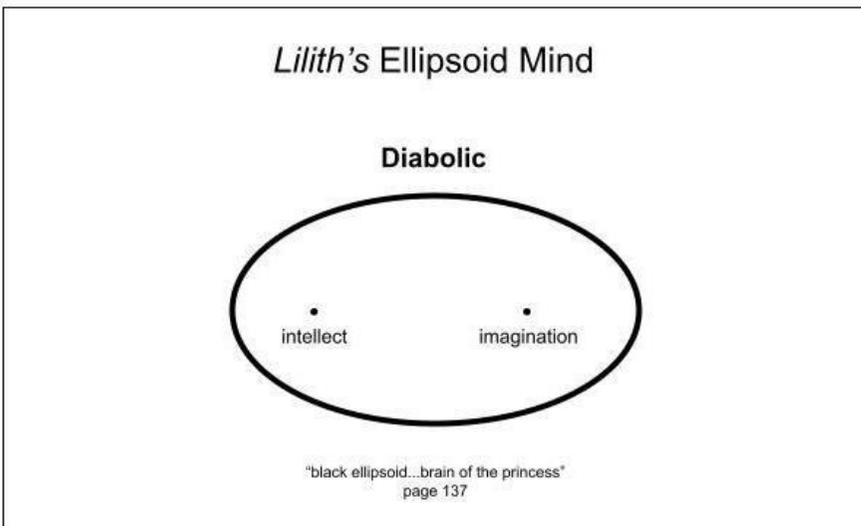
Figure 1. "On the Description of Oval Curves, and those having a plurality of Foci; with remarks by Professor Forbes." James Clerk Maxwell, 1846, *The Proceedings of the Royal Society of Edinburgh*, Vol. II,

https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Page:The_scientific_papers_of_James_Clerk_Maxwell_Volume_1.djvu/39.

Admittedly, Maxwell is best known for his contribution to the study of electromagnetism. This article about ellipses, published in 1846 by the Royal Society of Edinburgh, is especially significant, not so much because of its content, but because of its date of publication. Maxwell was only 14

years of age at the time! Apparently, this prodigious accomplishment did not escape the notice of MacDonald, and safe to say, it would have been known by the typical educated Victorian of the time. Therefore, we should assume Vane is seeing ovals because this young Oxford graduate has been reading Maxwell. His imagination has been stocked with these images.¹¹

But why would such a seemingly random image from Maxwell show up in Vane's vision? Because, as Maxwell has demonstrated, *an ellipse has two foci*. Inasmuch as the single focus of the perfect sphere introduced by Dante is “thrown apart” (i.e., διαβαλλω), the resulting foci deform the sphere, producing an egg-like (i.e., διάβολος) shape:



What Vane has been painfully slow to realize is his connection to the ellipsoid. The ellipsoid is a vision of his diabolic mind. So long as Vane's intellect is divorced from his imagination, his mindscape has two foci. The misshaping anticipates a descent into moral ruin, described here

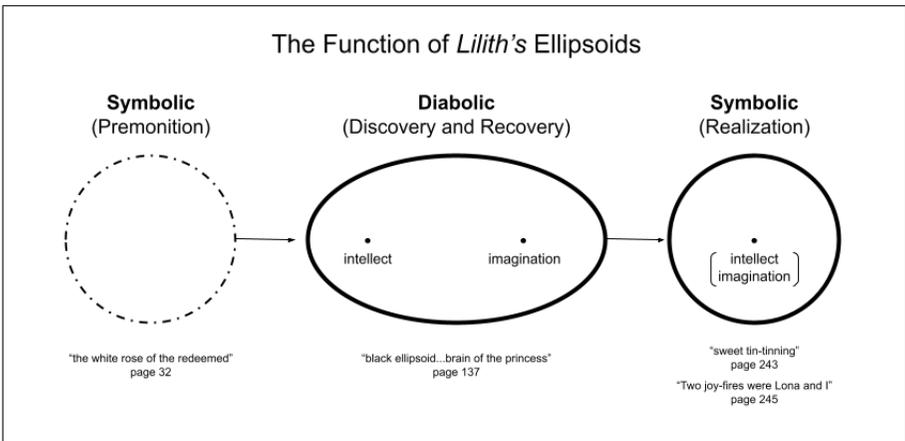
as a wobbly, elliptical spiral. The so-called “brain of the Princess,” for this reason, is a shadowy, “buzzing” ellipsoid (MacDonald, *Lilith* 137).¹² When Vane faces Lilith in the great elliptical hall of her palace, he is taking his place with her as the other foci of the ellipse (127). They belong together. Little does he know, the nightmare he faces in the hall of Lilith's palace is an estranged part of himself.

Another aspect to Vane's bibliographic vision is through *Gulliver's Travels* and the Lilliputian Little Ones, and here Vane's diabolic mindscape might be showing the influence of Swift's Laputans.¹³ Like Lilith, the wives of Laputa are neglected by their science-smitten husbands, and therefore are prone to adultery. Ten years before starting *Lilith*, MacDonald had experimented with this contrasexual imagery with his fairy story, *The History of Photogen and Nycteris*. He is suggesting through this imagery that a mind with an intellect unnaturally separated from the imagination becomes diabolic.¹⁴

Conclusion: Restoring the Soundness of the Sphere

The final *Paradiso* image (found in chapter XLV) stands in deliberate contrast to the shadowy ellipsoid hall of Lilith's palace. In this antepenultimate chapter, Lilith, the empress of Vane's diseased imagination, has been laid to rest and is replaced by her daughter Lona, the newly crowned empress of Vane's restored imagination. This pairing of Lona and Vane symbolizes the co-regency of his renewed mind. The intellect and imagination must reign together. In stark contrast to the dark,

buzzing ellipsoid deformed by Vane's estrangement from Lilith, his union with Lona restores the perfect sight and sound of the crystalline sphere. Standing together in single focus, Vane says, "Two joy-fires were Lona and I" (245). Thus, as Vane's scorned imagination is reconciled to his intellect, the menacing shadows needfully surrender to the clear, truth-sharing luminosity of Dante's solar sphere. In this way, the buzzing dissonance of his diabolic mind joyously resumes its proper music and form.



MacDonald's ambitious late-life project has been the object of much speculation over the years, and rightfully so. In MacDonald's own words, a tale like *Lilith* exists "not so much to convey a meaning as to wake a meaning" ("Fantastic Imagination" 317). Nevertheless, when considering *Lilith's* ingenious bibliographic constitution, one thing becomes clear: this astonishing work has been crafted to show how an imagination divorced from the intellect spirals into decadence. The dual faculties of intellect and imagination, MacDonald insists, are meant to work together for the moral

good, giving humanity the richness and depth of binocular vision. For this reason, an integrated curriculum with great works of imaginative literature must never be abandoned. If, however, the intellect insists on the strict monocular vision of empirical science or fundamentalist religion, the unattended eye of imagination is left to wander, starving both science and religion of vital meaning and creativity, while at the same time haunting the peripheral field of human consciousness with the menacing shadows of moral ruin. MacDonald says, "The power that might have gone forth into conceiving the noblest forms of action, in realizing the lives of the true-hearted, the self-forgetting, will go forth in building airy castles of vain ambition, of boundless riches, of unearned admiration" ("The Imagination" 29-30). *Lilith* is a true masterpiece that gives shape to this prophetic warning.

Endnotes

1. Mendelson calls *Lilith* "a bibliographic excursion" (26).
2. See Michael Wayne Wilhelm, "Chapter 8: Lilith's Dantean Homecoming Structure," *North Wind: A Journal of George MacDonald Studies*, vol. 39, no. 4, 2020, <https://digitalcommons.snc.edu/northwind/vol39/iss1/4>.
3. Wilhelm 129.
4. This scene is reminiscent of the famous John Singer Sargent painting, "Ellen Terry as Lady Macbeth" (1889). More importantly, of MacDonald's many lecture subjects,

Macbeth was a favorite. Barbara Amell has shown the strong connection Lilith has with Lady Macbeth. See “*Lilith* and the Lecturer,” *Wingfold*, no. 65, Winter 2009, 25-31.

5. The Lady Macbeth images actually begin surfacing early in the novel. She appears in chapter XI in the Evil Wood, inciting the violence with these words: “Ye are men: Slay one another!” (54).
6. Lamia is described as having “silver mail” (Keats 831). She also has colorful rings and bars (829).
7. “The lady fell, and clasped his knees, / Her face upraised, her eyes o’erflowing...” (Coleridge 369).
8. Similarly, Bard Bracy has a vision of a dove and says, “I stooped, methought, the dove to take, / When lo! I saw a bright green snake / coiled around its wings and neck.” Ibid. MacDonald is still drawing from this section of the poem.
9. See Keats 843. MacDonald borrows the imagery but changes the purpose. Where Apollonius desires to use cold philosophy to banish this apparently unsafe symbol of the poetic imagination, MacDonald wants to expose Lilith so that she might be redeemed and reclaimed. It is a fascinating contrast.
10. See "Maxwell, James Clerk," *A Dictionary of Scientists*, Oxford University Press, 1999, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780192800862.001.0001/acref9780192800862-e-964>.
11. The mention of polarized light throughout *Lilith's* multi-manuscript editing process is more evidence of Maxwell.

12. This is likely a nod to the buzzing flies of Spenser's House of Alma. See *Faerie Queene* II.IX.51.
13. The imagery is made explicit in *Lilith A*, and then is muted with subtlety in the final published version. See *Lilith, First and Final*.
14. See Dearborn 88.

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Contributor Note

Michael Wayne Wilhelm is the senior chaplain at Cal Farley's, a worldwide leader in the field of residential childcare for boys and girls, providing services at no cost to families. He holds an M.A. in Biblical Interpretation from Lubbock Christian University, a Certificate in Spiritual Direction (CSD) from Perkins School of Theology at SMU, and a Ph.D. in Humanities from Faulkner University's Great Books Honors College. Mike and his wife Lee reside in Gruver, Texas. They have 2 sons and 5 grandchildren.