Thoreau’s Economy and George MacDonald’s Lilith: Walking Between Self-Reliance and Christian Submission

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George MacDonald’s fantasy novel *Lilith* (1895) is an enigmatic work: its central characters include a talking raven who transforms into the first man, Adam, and his two wives—Lilith, who rejects his patriarchy after bearing a child, and Eve, who is willing to accept Adam’s rule. In fact, during one discussion between Adam and the first-person narrator, Mr. Vane, Vane exclaims in an exasperated voice: “Enigma treading on enigma. I did not come here to be asked riddles.” Adam replies: “No; but you came, and found the riddles waiting for you! Indeed you are yourself the only riddle. What you call riddles are truths, and seem riddles because you are not true . . . And you must answer the riddles! They will go on asking themselves until you understand yourself. The universe is a riddle trying to get out, and you are holding your door hard against it” (45). *Lilith* is an enigmatic riddle that demands, yet defies solution, which makes the work a god-send to literary types who smack their critical lips as they attempt to figure out the *Lilith* puzzle. I guess my lips should be smacking right now.

MacDonald’s biographer, William Raeper, writes that “*Lilith* is MacDonald’s masterpiece” (364), echoing the belief of MacDonald’s most staunch supporter, C. S. Lewis. “It was also his ‘dark night of the soul,’” continues Raeper, “exposing the terrible struggle between light and shade that had battled in his consciousness since his earliest days. It is not an easy book to read and it took MacDonald five years from the time he first sat down to write it before it was published in its final form” (364). Much critical discussion on the novel, consequently, has focused on the psychological dimension invoking Freud, Jung, Winnicott, and Lacan. In turn, many critics have followed the lead of Colin Manlove and have highlighted the Christian elements of the novel, labeling it a foundational text in the sub-genre of Christian fantasy. Most recently, critics have delved more minutely in MacDonald’s theology in hopes of resurrecting him as a major religious thinker of the nineteenth century. Little criticism, however, has contextualized *Lilith* in relation to other literary works, particularly works contemporaneous with the text. Of course, the obvious references have
been dissected: Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, William Blake’s etchings for Blair’s *Grave*, which hung in MacDonald’s study. And one cannot underestimate Novalis’s influence, for *Lilith* ends with a quotation from Novalis (that also appears in MacDonald’s earlier fantasy, *Phantastes* [1858]): “Our life is no dream, but it should and will perhaps become one” (252). It is an overlooked connection, a Transatlantic one, that is particularly compelling: the surprising connection to Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden* (1854).

*Lilith* begins with a quotation from Thoreau’s essay “Walking” (1862). In this excerpt focused on Spaulding’s Farm, Thoreau writes: “Their home was not obvious to vision; their trees grew throughout. I do not know whether I heard the sound of suppressed hilarity or not. They seemed to recline on sunbeams . . . . Their attics were the tops of trees” (qtd. in *Lilith* 2). Thoreau talks about the “co-habitancy”—the interconnectedness of past, present, and future—which many critics cite as the central connection to *Lilith*—the fantasy novel explores such “co-habitancy” that reflects the world of the seven-dimension, which allows Mr. Vane to journey to the fantastical landscape. Raven-Adam tells Vane, for example, that a “tree stands on the hearth” (22) of Vane’s house and demonstrates this co-habitancy by claiming the following: “There! I smell Grieg’s Wedding March in the quiver of those rose-petals” (23). This notion of co-habitancy connects to another influence on MacDonald—Swedenborg, whose theory of correspondences connected the spiritual with the material, similar to Thoreau’s “Walking.”

Thoreau’s term *sauntering*, to walk without direction or purpose, is central to the journey of the protagonist Vane. Thoreau defines the term further in “Walking” as “having no particular home, but equally at home everywhere.” “Every walk is a sort of crusade, preached by some Peter the Hermit in us, to go forth and reconquer this Holy Land from the hands of the Infidels,” continues Thoreau. The plot—if we can call it a plot—of *Lilith* is of the journey home as Vane learns that he must leave his home to return home—to find his Self before he can return. Vane’s sauntering, he discovers, needs to lead him to death, where we can begin his life again in the Holy Land of Heaven; in effect, Vane becomes this Peter the Hermit. The religious dimension to sauntering would have also appealed to MacDonald. As Thoreau writes: “No wealth can buy the requisite leisure, freedom, and independence which are the capital in this profession. It comes only by the grace of God. It requires a direct dispensation from Heaven to become a walker.” Thoreau concludes his essay with the following statement: “So we saunter toward the Holy Land, till one day the sun shall shine more brightly than ever he has done, shall perchance shine into our
minds and hearts, and light up our whole lives with a great awakening light, as warm and serene and golden as on a banksid in autumn.” Thoreau contends that walking has a profound spiritual investment—it becomes “the gospel according to the moment.”

When Thoreau spiritualizes walking and sauntering as an anti-capitalist enterprise, this seemingly productivless occupation of sauntering aimlessly is essential to MacDonald’s view of salvation. MacDonald creates a spiritual economy in 

Lilith, just as Thoreau does in 

Walden. I argue that while there are many inter-textual connections of shared core concepts related to nature and labor, it is the use of “spiritual economy” where the texts most intersect and diverge. Through spiritual economy, MacDonald is indebted to Thoreau and yet is most in a bind. On the one hand, 

Lilith argues for the Thoreauvian economy of self-reliance (what MacDonald will transform into a spiritual economy). On the other hand, this spiritual economy of self-reliance is at odds with the Christian world of subservience to God’s will. This tension is seen clearly in the two central characters, Vane and Lilith: Vane accepts his subservient role, following Adam and Eve into the House of Death, realizing that the true economy of his world—what he has labored toward—is death, a death that lead to more life. Lilith, however, is not so easily subdued—she reflects more accurately Thoreau’s notion of independence and self-reliance (also influenced by Emerson). This independence, finally, must be subdued in the spiritual economy of Heaven.


Walden’s opening chapter is entitled “Economy” and is the keynote to the entire work. 

Walden begins with a return from the woods. “At present I am a sojourner in civilized life again” (3), writes Thoreau, evoking the walking metaphor that he will examine in detail in “Walking.” Thoreau’s economy is two-fold: he realizes that “the mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation” (8), so his sojourning to Walden Pond is a way to right himself with the external economics of the world. To Thoreau, humans have only need for the “gross necessaries of life” (11), which translates into food, shelter, clothing, and fuel that provides for “the grand necessity . . . to keep warm, to keep the vital heat in us” (13). Much of 

Walden concentrates on these necessities as Thoreau argues for the simplicity of life, for the return to an economic of basics. As he argues, once humans have these necessities, they can turn “to adventure on life now” (15). But Thoreau is also interested in another kind of economics that is equally important—that of the internal or spiritual economics of life. Thus he relocates to Walden Pond “to transact some private business,” to conduct “a little enterprise” (20), where he can proceed in “minding [his] . . . business” (18), for
“Walden pond would be a good place for business” (21). As Thomas Birch and Fred Metting argue, Thoreau creates an “alternative theory of value” (593) where his “economy at Walden was designed to achieve precisely these moments of internal growth” (595). And Richard Grusin writes: “Thoreau acknowledges the symbolic value of spiritual capital in a society where the monetary value of material capital is all” (37). Thus Thoreau admits that he “went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived” (90). He also states: “Not till we are lost, in other words, not till we have lost the world, do we begin to find ourselves, and realize where we are and the infinite extent of our relations” (171).

MacDonald’s Lilith follows the trajectory of Walden’s “plot.” The fantasy conducts its own private business, forcing Vane to saunter from the external economic world that he physically inhabits to the internal spiritual economics found in fairyland that allows him to discover that to live fully is to live to die, to place your faith in the Good Death of God’s design that brings true, eternal life. Lilith begins with Vane returning to his family estate—alone—where he tells us that he was overseeing the “management of the estate” (5) and to “take possession (10) of the house; immediately, then, we realize that Vane has returned to manage the external economics of his life. He has pursued his studies at Oxford, so he is ready to begin his career, his work in homage to his deceased family. A key symbol is the portrait of “Sir Upward” (8), which is hanging in the library. Sir Upward suggests one economic journey—to rise in the world through capitalistic endeavor. And Vane’s name itself suggests a self-satisfaction that may be attributed to his inheritance of the estate, which would make him a land-owner, placing him in the ranks of the aristocratic upper class.

But Vane soon sees a manuscript on a bookshelf that appears to be part of two separate worlds, and he then beholds an old librarian (Raven-Adam), who guides him into the other world, a spiritual dimension we will find out. When Vane enters this fairyland, he continues to observe it using the same economic metaphors that he used to describe his reappearance at his family’s estate. He says of his first sojourn to the fairy world: “I was in a world, or call it state of things, an economy of conditions, an idea of existence, so little correspondent with the ways and modes of this world—” (12). As he tries to describe this world, he becomes frustrated over the limits of language and says that it is a “constant struggle to say what cannot be said” of “any possible events of this economy” (46). At one point, Vane considers “an altogether foolish dream of
opening a commerce in gems between the two worlds . . .” (172-73). Mr. Raven reminds Vane that “indeed the business of the universe is to make such a fool of you that you will know yourself for one, and so begin to be wise!” (26). But Vane is unwilling to stay in this spiritual world, to lie down on the couch in the sexton’s cottage (Raven-Adam’s dwelling) to die into life. In other words, Vane cannot yet accept the spiritual economics. So he flees because he feels that he has not done anything worthy yet. He states: “Surely a man must do a day’s work first . . . . Let me first go home . . . and come again after I have found or made, invented, or at least discovered something” (29). And, thus, begins Vane’s sojourn or sauntering in fairyland to find his true self through death.

It is interesting to see that Vane’s initial world view is one based on the external economics of capitalism—to be fulfilled is to succeed in the business world. Birch and Metting argue that Thoreau challenges in Walden the “Calvinistic doctrine that earthly duties, such as work, were necessarily a hardship to be endured and that the accumulation of wealth was a symbol of spiritual success” (588). Rather, Thoreau was concerned with the “internal industry” (588). The same can be said of MacDonald, who spent his entire life battling against the rigid doctrines of Calvinistic thought. Thus the plot of Lilith shifts to a new economic order—that of Vane’s attempt of discover the spiritual economics of his self.

This move to the spiritual economics happens primarily through Vane’s encounter with Lilith. While in fairyland Vane must “save” Lilith from death; by bringing her back to life, he must take responsibility for his actions by traveling to the corrupt city of Bulika (controlled by Lilith) and rescuing the Lovers—innocent children who have not been corrupted by adulthood—from the Bags, the adult, greedy giants. Once Vane’s quest is complete, he is ready to return home to his estate, knowing that he has helped others, learned about his Self, and submitted to the will of God, where he will be rewarded in death with more, true life. When Vane first encounters Lilith he thinks that she is dead but soon discovers that she is not; he feels compelled to save her. “I leapt to my feet,” he describes, “here was the warmth, I sought—the first necessity of life!” (99), a direct echo to Walden. Vane proceeds to secure all the necessaries that Thoreau highlights—warmth, food, clothing, and shelter. Vane resurrects Lilith because in fairyland he says, “Now I knew what solitude meant” (102) and he comes to realize the following: “A man to be perfect—complete that is, in having reached the spiritual condition of persistent and universal growth, which is the mode wherein he inherits the infinitude of his Father—must have the education of a world of fellow-men. . . . . Better to do about with them—
infinitely better—than to live alone!” (103).

By saving Lilith, Vane begins to understand his spiritual self, his spiritual economy. However, at this point MacDonald begins to part ways to a degree with Thoreau. Vane realizes that solitude is only another word for loneliness, thus rejecting Thoreau’s notion of solitude as defined in Walden’s chapter, “Solitude.” Lilith, contrary to Vane, demands such solitude of independence and self-reliance. She refused to be under Adam’s rule and left him, becoming a dangerous woman—a vampire or succubus—who feeds off men for her power. She tells Raven: “I will do as myself please—as my Self desires” (199). “I am what I am.” “I will not be remade” (202). And here we have the crux of MacDonald’s problem: he desires to suppress Lilith to God’s will, but he is also fascinated by her independence and self-will.

When Lilith flees, Vane must journey to Bulika, a city ruled by Lilith and corrupted by greedy self-satisfaction, and “save” Lilith by allowing Adam and Eve to force her to repent so that she may find her spiritual economy that will allow her to die and become reborn. Lilith’s self-reliance is seen in her clenched hand, a defiant fist—“Her right hand also was now clenched—upon existent Nothing—her inheritance” (206). Lilith’s inheritance is not external, like Vane’s inheritance of his estate; ironically, it reflects a spiritual inheritance, one that is corrupted. Once Lilith is captured, Raven-Adam cuts off her clenched hand, sends Vane on a journey to bury the hand and release the fruitful waters so that renewal can begin for Lilith. At the end of the fantasy Lilith is still in process of repentance, symbolized by her hand. Adam tells Vane: “Where the dead deformity hung, the true, lovely hand is already growing” (219).

Lilith’s hand may be the key for Vane to move from the external economics to the internal, spiritual one. In other words, MacDonald uses Lilith to teach Vane this lesson; she gives him literally a hand, to use a very bad pun. In Walden Thoreau laments the fact that a student studies “political economy, while that economy of living which is synonymous with philosophy is not even sincerely professed in our colleges. The consequence is, that while he is reading Adam Smith, Ricardo, and Say, he runs his father is debt irretrievably” (52).

Smith’s laissez-faire economics—a hands off policy—is stunted to Thoreau because it does not allow for the economy of living, an economy that is based on the spirit and self. But Birch and Metting remind us that Thoreau was searching for an “alternative theory of value” (593) that was “designed to achieve precisely these moments of internal growth” (594). They argue that “Thoreau’s pursuit of the self seems most clearly linked to Smith’s concept of the invisible hand,” where the “socioeconomic order has a larger spiritual
significance (thus the providential invisible hand)” (598). The invisible hand, as defined by Smith in *Wealth of Nations*, is “to promote an end which was not part of [the original] intention.” In *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Smith claims that people “are led by an invisible hand to make nearly the same distribution of the necessaries of life . . . and thus without intending it, without knowing it, advance the interest of the society, and afford means to the multiplication of the species.” We can see Smith invisible hand in *Walden*, particularly when Thoreau discusses philanthropy. He writes: “What good I go in common sense of the word, must be aside from my main path, and for the most part wholly unintended” (73).

Lilith operates as a kind of invisible hand; her defiance and resistance, ironically, leads to events totally unintended—the saving of Vane and the eventual saving of her self by a benevolent God. God, too, becomes that invisible hand. I do not intend to force the connections between Smith’s invisible hand and Lilith’s hand, but hands do play an integral role in Vane’s and Lilith’s development. And MacDonald was enamored with his fellow Scots, and Smith was one of Scotland’s most famous writers. At the end of *Lilith*, while Vane travels to the “great city” (246) with the Lovers, he is close to the gate when “a hand, warm and strong, laid hold of mine, and drew me to a little door with a golden lock. The door opened, the hand let mine go, and pushed me gently through. I turned quickly, and saw the board of a large book in the act of closing behind me. I stood alone in my library” (250). God’s invisible hand sends Vane back home, where with his spiritual economy now in order, can live his life in hopes that his day of reckoning will come when he is worthy to die and gain entrance to that great city—heaven—where true life begins.

On his journey Vane says that is was his “business to discover the ways and laws” (67) of the fairyland that he enters. He also says that “when a man will not act where he is, he must go far to find his work” (141). I have argued that MacDonald’s work or business in *Lilith* was to demonstrate the limits of external economics until one is able to embrace a spiritual economics that guides the necessaries of life. MacDonald found a spiritual guide in Thoreau. While the novel *Lilith* attempts to resolve this tension between the desire for the autonomous self in an external economic world, and the desire of a subservient self in a spiritual economics guided by God’s invisible hand, it primarily fails: the novel’s inability to harmonize these conflicting forces, however, makes it an importance fantasy, whose ultimate ambiguity suggests the complex spiritual economics of the work; the struggle Vane and Lilith have reflects a universal one that readers of *Lilith* face each day as they trudge—not saunter—off to work.
Thoreau concludes *Walden* by telling his readers to “drive a nail home and clinch it so faithfully that you can wake up in the night and think of your work with satisfaction,—a work at which you would not be ashamed to invoke the Muse” (330). MacDonald evokes the Muse Thoreau to show us that our final day’s work is a spiritual labor that leads us to an otherworldly economy of eternal life.

Greville MacDonald, in *George MacDonald and His Wife*, a biography-tribute to his father, discusses at length his father’s difficulty making money from his writing—certainly echoes of Thoreau here—and concludes that “my father’s work had to be apprized rather by some law of spiritual economics than condemned by the world on the score of his not ‘getting on.’ His work was the scattering of seed wide flung and free for whomever . . .” (273). It might very well be that those seeds were germinated by another sower, who sauntered into MacDonald’s mind and taught him the spiritual economics of *Walden*.

**Works Cited**


