Riddled with Evil: Fantasy as Theodicy in George MacDonald’s Phantastes and Lilith

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George MacDonald’s life was permeated by a hyper-awareness of death, first through the early deaths of close family members and then through the tuberculosis which constantly threatened his life. Yet MacDonald did not live in fear of death, but in longing for it. In a letter to his wife in 1891, MacDonald writes in comfort about the death of their daughter Lilia, “Oh dear, what a mere inn of a place the world is! and thank God! we must widen and widen our thoughts and hearts. A great good is coming to us all—too big for this world to hold” (“G.M.D. to his Wife” 524). While death is to be desired for MacDonald, this longing is balanced with an equally strong sense of the wonder of this world. Objecting to an Evangelical religion which called for the rejection of the material world in order to win eternity, MacDonald wrote to his father:

One of my greatest difficulties in consenting to think of religion was that I thought I should have to give up my beautiful thoughts and my love for the things God had made. But I find that the happiness springing from all things not in themselves sinful is much increased by religion. God is the God of the beautiful, Religion the love of the Beautiful . . . . (“G.M.D. to his Father” 108)

For MacDonald, both this world and the next are good, but this world is good because it points to God. Stephen Prickett and Frank Riga recognize in this attitude toward God and the physical world a Platonic idealism in which the physical world is the evanescent image which can lead us to the real in God. However, seeing MacDonald as a Platonist is problematic, which both Prickett and Riga acknowledge in using that label, one calling him a “temperamental Platonist” (Prickett, Victorian 170) and the other demonstrating the impurity of that Platonism (Riga 112), because it is contradictory for a Platonist to maintain the goodness of the material world while claiming its unreality. As David Robb observes, MacDonald “is opposed to materialism in all its forms, but his position is complicated by his seemingly opposite tendency to revel in the beauty and variety, the very evanescence, of the thing to be despised” (“Fiction” 38). By making this theoretical move, MacDonald abandons
locating the source of evil in the material world. But if evil is not in the illusory material world as Platonists hold, what is it and where is it? How can MacDonald maintain the goodness of this world while personally longing for death?

This theoretical problem does not point to a failure in MacDonald’s theology, for as Prickett observes, “Behind the magical beings of MacDonald’s universes lies the philosophical and theological principles of a scheme that is as carefully worked out as that of Dante” (“Two” 22). MacDonald’s failure to reject the material world by identifying it as evil is not merely a blip in his Platonism, but points to a different theology altogether. His fantasies written for adults, *Phantastes* and *Lilith*, the bookends of his writing career, outline the solution to the riddle of valuing both this world and the next. Instead of Platonism, MacDonald illustrates in these novels different facets of an Augustinian conception of the universe in which evil is the privation of good and all things with substance are good. Written at the beginning of his career and while he was a young man, *Phantastes* demonstrates the value and meaningfulness of the material world and subtly identifies the source of evil as the will of the self. His last major work, written during a time of increasing depression and declining health, *Lilith*, explores the workings of evil as it permeates the world. Ultimately, MacDonald exhibits a Platonism refracted through Augustine with an understanding of evil as the non-substantive privation of good, thereby allowing the celebration both of this life and the next one and laying the theoretical foundation for MacDonald’s belief in the future redemption of all people and all things.

British study of Augustine was rejuvenated in 1838 when Edward Pusey published a widely available revised translation of Augustine’s *The Confessions* (Cobb). MacDonald’s academic and religious training ensures his familiarity with this text and the theology behind it. In *The Confessions* and his Christian writings, Augustine, inheriting Platonism through Plotinus, posits an idealistic universe structured as a continuum with God, as the Supreme Good and That Which Is, at the top and the created world at the bottom. God, for Augustine, is the Real, the Good, and the Ultimate Substance. Everything else in the world has substance (which is not synonymous with material) in a lesser degree. Because God is good and he created all things, nothing he created can be evil. In *The Confessions*, Augustine claims that “therefore whatsoever is, is good. That evil then which I sought, whence it is, is not any substance: for were it a substance, it should be good” (122). Corroboratively, in *The City of God*, Augustine observes that “evil has no positive nature; the
loss of good has received the name ‘evil’” (354). While the Platonic hierarchy
puts the evil material at the bottom and the good ideal at the top, Augustinian
cosmology affirms the goodness and reality of all substances along a
continuum which ascends from good but less substance to even better, more
real substance, finally terminating in That Which Is. For Augustine, no part of
this continuum is in itself bad or evil.

Before his conversion to Christianity, Augustine studied for several
years with the Manicheans, who maintained a strict, antagonistic dualism
between the evil material world and the good spiritual world. Yet Augustine
struggled with this explanation for the existence of evil because it implies
that God created evil. After leaving the Manichees because of their failure
to expound a satisfying explanation for evil, Augustine formulated the idea
that evil is merely the privation of good and therefore has no substance, since
all substance is good through its creation by a good God. This facilitated
a new attitude toward the material world. Encouraged by the Platonists to
“search for incorporeal truth,” Augustine began to see God’s “invisible things,
understood by those things which are made” (Confessions 126). According
to the Platonists, the seeker begins on the lowest rung of the hierarchy, the
created world, and then proceeds upward, abandoning the previous rung
with the implication that the lowest rung, although necessary, is evil. Instead,
Augustine claims the inherent goodness of even the distant points on the
continuum because they are created by God. In The City of God, he asserts
that “all natures, then, inasmuch as they are, and have therefore a rank and
species of their own, and a kind of internal harmony, are certainly good”
(384). This attempt to understand God through the created world coupled
with an assertion of the goodness of all substance is impossible with the
Manicheans and sets Augustine apart from Platonic idealism. Because the
natural world is good, Augustine, unlike the Platonists, can embrace it fully
and classify evil as the privation of good.

For Augustine, the theoretical challenge was how evil is introduced
into the world if all things are good. Augustine suggests that when the will
abandons what is above itself, and turns to what is lower, it becomes evil—not
because that is evil to which it turns, but because the turning itself is wicked.
Therefore it is not an inferior thing which has made the will evil, but it is itself
which has become so by wickedly and inordinately desiring an inferior thing.
(City 386)

He adds that “defection from that supremely is, to that which has less
of being—this is to begin to have an evil will” (387). In The Confessions,
Augustine explains how evil works within the individual: “when I did will or nill any thing, I was most sure, that no other than myself did will and nill: and I all but saw that there was the cause of my sin” (110). To have an evil will is to have disordered desires. This implies that all things that can be desired have intrinsic value, but that some things have more value than others, and should be desired accordingly.

Instead of locating evil outside of the person by blaming it on some evil force in the universe as the Manichees did, Augustine conceives of the traditional Devil and his fallen angels as individual examples of the entrance of evil into an individual existence. He explains: “If we ask the cause of the misery of the bad [angels], it occurs to us, and not unreasonably, that they are miserable because they have forsaken Him who supremely is, and have turned toward themselves who have no such essence” (City 385). He continues about the nature of angels, “whilst by abandoning Him it should become, not indeed no nature at all, but a nature with a less ample existence, and therefore wretched” (385). To do evil is not to choose the material over the physical as the Manichees would suggest, but is to turn away from God and toward the self, something that is good but is less good than God, causing a disordering of the desires.

MacDonald’s *Phantastes*, the story of a young man who unknowingly “set out to find [his] Ideal” (184), reveals a Platonic idealism in the conception of physical things as images of transcendent ideals which a person should seek to understand. Mirroring the experience in Plato’s “Allegory of the Cave” from *The Republic*, Anodos is completely unaware of the existence of the ideal, the goal of life, when he enters fairyland, an ignorance betrayed in his constant bewilderment and aimless wandering. However, when he sees the lady imprisoned in the marble, the existence of the ideal flashes upon him. Awed by her, he notes: “What I did see appeared to me perfectly lovely; more near the face that had been born with me in my soul, than anything I had seen before in nature or art” (36). Anodos becomes aware of an ideal for which he yearns and which is beyond the luminous surface of the material marble. This idealism also permeates Anodos’s reading in the Fairy Palace, where he “was trying to find the root of a manifestation, the spiritual truth whence a material vision sprang” (75-76). Elaborating the process of this reading, Anodos notes that the fairy book “glowed and flashed the thoughts upon the soul, with such a power that the medium disappeared from the consciousness, and it was occupied only with the things themselves” (84). Through his reading, Anodos almost achieves a Platonic ecstasy in which he perceives the things as they
are, bypassing the material of the book which he reads. Anodos’s journey, like that in Plato’s “Allegory of the Cave,” is a gradual realization of the ideal which grounds the existence of material objects.

Yet the idealism of Anodos is not wholly Platonic because it does not reject and devalue the physical, particular embodiment of the ideal after it has been used as a tool for contemplating that ideal. When Anodos finally catches up to the White Lady in the evening dance at the Fairy Palace, his singing her into a fully sensuous life is a positive, not negative, achievement. As he sings, “a real woman-soul was revealing itself by successive stages of imbodiment [sic], and consequent manifestation and expression” (112). Hers is the “face that had been born with [him] in [his] soul” (36), the ideal which he pursues. Yet the celebration of her embodiment suggests that knowing the ideal intellectually is somehow dissatisfying and that an embodiment of the ideal in beautiful material is preferable. This breaks with Platonic idealism and the accompanying dualism which suggests that the spiritual is always better than the material. Instead, material objects formed from the ideal are to be celebrated in themselves. Frank Riga understands this process by suggesting that MacDonald demonstrates an impure Platonism which “accommodated the essential goodness of the flesh and its ultimate purification and resurrection” (112). But instead of merely an impure Platonism, MacDonald brilliantly illustrates an Augustinian understanding of the universe in which all things possessing substance are inherently good because created by a good God.

Phantastes celebrates the entire natural world, pointing toward an Augustinian understanding of the goodness of the universe as created by God. Like Augustine’s confrontation with the Manichees over their dichotomy between evil material and good spiritual powers in the universe, MacDonald faced religious people, especially in the growing Evangelical sect, who believed that the material world was evil and the spiritual world was good. In Charlotte Brontë’s Jane Eyre, Mr. Brocklehurst exemplifies this Victorian Manichaean phenomenon: he mortifies the flesh to improve the soul. He chastises the headmistress for feeding the girls bread and cheese instead of burnt porridge and he even requires the cutting of the girls’ hair when he thinks long hair will cause the lust of the flesh (53-54). While MacDonald is in “unrelenting opposition to the materialism of the modern outlook” (Robb MacDonald 23), MacDonald, in Phantastes, holds what Rolland Hein suggests is a sacramental view of nature (65-66), in which he proclaims the religious power of nature, redeeming the beauty of the physical, material world from Evangelicals who brand it as evil. In Anodos’s reading in the
Fairy Library, he discovers that “All that man sees has to do with man. Worlds cannot be without an intermundane relationship. The community of the centre of all creation suggests an interradianating connection and dependence of the parts” (77). The natural world is not evil, but is interrelated with the spiritual; the poles of binary dualism are brought together in the “community of the centre.”

The lavish descriptions of the natural world through which Anodos travels reveal MacDonald’s appreciation of the created order. The very beginning of Anodos’s adventure celebrates the beauty of the natural world which invades Anodos’s bedroom:

where this carpet, which I had myself designed to imitate a field of grass and daisies, bordered the course of the little stream, the grass-blades and daisies seemed to wave in a tiny breeze that followed the water’s flow; while under the rivulet they bent and swayed with every motion of the changeful current, as if they were about to dissolve in it, and, forsaking their fixed form become fluent as the waters. (9)

Not merely a method of discovering ideals, the natural world is inherently valuable. Later Anodos sleeps in the arms of the earth where “glow-worm was alight here and there, burning out into the great universe. The night-hawk heightened all the harmony and stillness with his oft-recurring, discordant jar” (42). MacDonald portrays the earth as loving and lovely, its beauty a gift from God. Cutting between a Romantic idolization of nature and a Platonic disdain for the material, MacDonald manifests an Augustinian understanding of the created world as inherently good because created by God and as usefully good for man because through it he can think God’s thoughts after him.

In opposition to Victorian Manichees, Phantastes illustrates that evil is not within the natural world but corrupts it, a parasite on anything with substance, including the psyche. While evil characters scurry through the fantastic landscape, MacDonald never presents the Devil as the ultimate source of all evil, an impulse consistent with Augustinian evil. Evil has no single source in the universe from which it emanates (which would be a reverse structure of the good). Instead, MacDonald presents evil as a shadow over the self, locating evil within the self. Although the shadow which Anodos acquires at the cottage of the Ogress has been defined in many different ways, a diversity of interpretation which bothers David Robb (MacDonald 84), the shadow in each definition is something sinister, something evil: it is a negation of good. The source of Anodos’s shadow points to its definition as evil. When
Anodos enters the cottage of the Ogress, she is reading:

“So, then, as darkness had no beginning, neither will it ever have an end. So, then, it is eternal. The negation of aught else, is its affirmation. Where the light cannot come, there abideth darkness. The light doth but hollow a mine out of the infinite extension of darkness. And ever upon the steps of light treadeth the darkness; yea, springeth in fountains and wells amidst it, from the secret channels of its mighty sea. Truly, man is but a passing flame, moving unquietly amid the surrounding rest of night; without which he yet could not be, and whereof he is in part compounded.” (55-56)

This strange speech discusses the source of darkness, associated with evil in Christian imagery. The Ogress asserts the substance of darkness, of evil, and suggests that man’s existence is grounded in the darkness. Yet the fact that she is an Ogress implies that she is somehow evil so her words must be taken not as MacDonald’s own view, but as the opposite of it. Inverted, this speech outlines the Augustinian conception of substance and goodness (light). Darkness and light are in opposition, but light is substance and darkness is the absence of substance. Darkness, or evil, has no beginning or end, it is not eternal but rather non-existent. The Ogress inverts the Platonic Cave paradigm (in which a cave, or mine, is dug out of the “infinite extension” of lightness) by suggesting that the light dug a mine out of the substance of darkness. Yet even in her falsity, she does not set up an evil ideal around which this dark world is centered. Although the inversion and falsity of her speech is confusing, her chant points toward the meaning of evil as the absence of good.

Anodos’s acquisition of the shadow illustrates MacDonald’s Augustinian conception of evil and the self. Unfortunately for Anodos, his perverse impulse, his disordered desire, motivates him to open the door of the closet, of the inverted Platonic Cave, out of which his shadow, evil, finds him. After he sees a figure travelling towards him, he “looked round over [his] shoulder; and there, on the ground, lay a black shadow, the size of a man. It was so dark, that [he] could see it in the dim light of the lamp, which shone full upon it, apparently without thinning at all the intensity of its hue” (57).

The shadow has no independent existence, does not have its own substance, but is the negation of light, of good. It lives as a parasite on the self of Anodos. After gaining the shadow in the “Church of Darkness” (69), Anodos’s vision of the world is distorted by it. When he sees a child with a magical toy, “straightway he was a common place boy” (60) when the shadow affects
him. Anodos visits a town where if he gets too close to people they appear terrifically ugly when the shadow falls upon them (63). Eventually his self and his shadow are tangled up together, and he cries, when at the Fairy Palace: “‘Shadow of me!’ I said, ‘which art not me, but which representest thyself to me as me; here I may find a shadow of light which will devour thee, the shadow of darkness!’” (72). Yet there is no evidence or implication that the shadow has a self or a substance separate from Anodos—the shadow was “in [his] heart as well as at [his] heels” (64). Anodos’s loss of the shadow reveals the relationship of self and evil. He says,

Then first I knew the delight of being lowly; of saying to myself, “I am what I am, nothing more.” “I have failed,” I said, “I have lost my self—would it had been my shadow.” I looked round: the shadow was nowhere to be seen. Ere long, I learned that it was not myself, but only my shadow, that I had lost. . . . Indeed, my ideal soon became my life; whereas, formerly, my life had consisted in a vain attempt to behold, if not my ideal in myself, at least myself in my ideal. (166)

When Anodos focuses on himself, when he ignores the advice given to him by others, the shadow begins its terrorization of him when it comes from the depth of the darkness. In that shadowed state, Anodos no longer tries to seek the ideal, but only seeks to serve himself. This turning to self instead of looking toward God, the true ideal, is what Augustine pinpoints as the invasion of evil into the self. All the things which the self-centered try to achieve are good in themselves, but have been distorted by the disordered desires of an evil will which turns to the self, the lower good, rather than focusing on That Which Is, on God. Anodos escapes evil when he turns away from himself and toward the true ideal, making his journey a working through of what Max Keith Sutton calls the “disorders of a narcissistic personality” (13).

Yet the novel does not end merely on Anodos’s ecstatic loss of self in ever-increasing union with God. Instead Anodos must return, after he learns these lessons about self, evil, and the ideal, to the regular, non-fantasy, earthly world. In fairyland, Anodos dies and achieves union with and knowledge of the ideal. So when he awakens on the top of an earthly hill, he feels that he is “sinking from such a state of ideal bliss, into a world of shadows” (182). Like Plato’s philosopher-king, he must descend back into the world of images in order to lead the people. Yet this is not a true Platonism which disparages the natural world, but a cosmology which values the natural world as good,
but just not as good, not as real, as the world which Anodos has recently left. Wondering about what he has learned in fairyland, Anodos asks whether he is a “ghost, sent into the world to minister to [his] fellowmen, or, rather, to repair the wrongs [he] had already done” (184). Anodos’s sorrow in returning to this world is not that this world is evil, but that it does not have the full reality which imbued fairyland. This earthly world is not evil, but because it is not as real, it is not as good.

Finally, the book ends with Anodos speaking with a tone of confidence: “Yet I know that good is coming to me—that good is always coming; though few have at all times the simplicity and the courage to believe it. What we call evil, is the only and best shape, which, for the person and his condition at the time, could be assumed by the best good” (185). For Anodos, evil has no independent existence. Instead, good is always coming because the entirely good world is ever in a movement of tighter and tighter spirals toward the perfection of the “community of the centre,” of the top of the hierarchy or the center of the bulls’ eye: the Supreme Good, the Augustinian God at the center of the universe, out of whom all of the Platonic ideas spring and then are clothed with good substance to form the good natural world.

The conception of good and evil illustrated by *Phantastes* is an implicit version of Augustine’s Plato-informed conception of the universe and of evil. By asserting the value and goodness of the material world through articulation of evil as something which cuts across the material and spiritual as the privation of good, MacDonald rescues material life and makes it meaningful while also celebrating the life which is to come. Yet the novel, because it is almost completely centered around Anodos and his psyche, does not contain a full elaboration of how evil functions in the world at large. MacDonald’s late novel, *Lilith*, contains MacDonald’s clearer theodicy, his explanation of evil in the universe. In this bitter and weird novel, MacDonald exposes the functioning of evil and illustrates its corruption of the self and its social impact, while still maintaining the goodness of a world shadowed by evil.

From the beginning of the novel, *Lilith* presents, through Vane’s journey of upward movement, an Augustinian understanding of the universe as a continuum culminating in ultimate good and of humanity’s status in that continuum. Vane’s ancestor is identified as a Sir Upward who suddenly disappeared and was never heard from again (9), implying that he moved “Upward” on the continuum. In the second chapter of the novel, Vane begins this upward journey by following Mr. Raven up the stairs into the garret.
where a new world is revealed to him through a magical mirror. Paralleling the Platonic “Allegory of the Cave,” Vane turns away from the attractive world he sees out of his window and climbs the stairs to the attic and into knowledge of another world. Vane’s movement from regular earthly reality into the fairy world is conceptualized as an unwilling upward movement as the magnetism of Mr. Raven compels him toward a fuller understanding of the universe. Once in fairyland, Vane continues the upward journey through this higher plane. Mr. Raven attempts to communicate this multi-level conception of reality when he tells Vane that they are “‘[i]n the region of the seven dimensions’” (21) which interpenetrate, but that the immature Vane can only see the three regular dimensions. As Mr. Raven is “‘widening [Vane’s] horizon’” (22), Vane begins to grasp that there are more levels to reality than he comprehends. In an Augustinian fashion, Vane’s passage will be through those levels as he “journeys spiritually toward oneness with God,” as Rolland Hein labels it (91).

Although often a strange and menacing landscape, the natural world in *Lilith* is affirmed instead of debased. Mr. Raven tells Vane, “‘All live things were thoughts to begin with, and are fit therefore to be used by those that think. When one says to the great Thinker:—‘Here is one of thy thoughts: I am thinking it now!’ that is a prayer—a word to the big heart from one of its own little hearts’” (26). Platonically, the natural world is the flimsy embodiment of an ideal to be discarded when its utility ends; but this passage celebrates the natural thing as a way to understand God and his creation.

When Vane returns to his library after his second trip to fairyland, he ponders, “Which was the real—what I now saw, or what I had just ceased to see? Could both be real, interpenetrating yet unmingling?” (37). The different worlds, “interpenetrating yet unmingling,” are both real and are intimately knitted together. However, as David Robb points out, “the world into which Vane stumbles has an additional quality of being there” (*MacDonald* 97). It exists on a higher rung of the continuum of reality, where substance and goodness increase as a thing approaches the terminal end of that continuum, That Which Is. Although fairyland seems to be a on a higher rung of the Augustinian universal hierarchy, the reality of the earthly world is not negated. Both worlds are real, although possibly not equally real, and both worlds are good, although perhaps not equally good.

Instead of identifying evil as something material, MacDonald illustrates the character of evil through the Shadow, an absence of light, a parasite upon substance, which oppresses Bulika and is especially powerful
around Lilith. Entering Bulika, Vane sees the Shadow, the symbol of ultimate evil, in the street:

At a place where he had to cross a patch of moonlight, I saw that he cast no shadow, and was himself but a flat superficial shadow, of two dimensions. He was, nevertheless, an opaque shadow, for he not merely darkened any object on the other side of him, but rendered it, in fact, invisible. In the shadow he was blacker than the shadow; in the moonlight he looked like one who had drawn his shadow up about him, for not a suspicion of it moved beside or under him . . . . When they passed together from the shadow into the moonlight, the Shadow deepened into blackness. (118-119)

As a symbol, the shadow is often employed to express something which has existence but no substance because it is the negation of light. Shadows are the darkness, the privation of light, as Augustinian evil is merely the non-substantial privation of good. MacDonald builds on this conception, but, because the Shadow is a being, he has a small amount of substance. The Shadow, as the “Prince of the Power of the Air” (75), has turned away from good for so long that his existence has almost dwindled to nothingness—a flat, two dimensional shape which has “no thick to him” (187). MacDonald’s Augustinian sense of evil as that which has no substance but is a negation of good is darkly expressed in the haunting persona of the Shadow.

Yet the responsibility for sin and evil in the novel does not lie with some independent evil force in the world, but is bound up in the choices of the self. Augustine explains specifically that selves generate evil when they “have forsaken Him who supremely is, and have turned to themselves who have no such essence” (City 385). Vane’s journeys illustrate this disparity between the real self grounded on “him who supremely is” and the evil self which attempts to form its own identity. Entering fairyland, Vane realizes that he does not know who he is: “Then I understood that I did not know myself, did not know what I was, had no grounds on which to determine that I was one and not another” (Lilith 14). Something outside of himself is required for existence; if he turns to himself to define himself, his identity disappears. In Vane’s second excursion to fairyland, Mr. Raven tells Vane that Vane is “but beginning to become an individual” (21), as he, like Anodos, works toward overcoming narcissism. Wandering through the Evil Wood, Vane also recognizes that self-focus, a turning to the self and away from God, constitutes hell: “What a hell of horror . . . to wander alone, a bare existence never going out of itself,
never widening its life in another life, but, bound with the cords of its poor peculiarities, lying an eternal prisoner in the dungeon of its own being! . . . evil was only through good! selfishness but a parasite on the tree of life” (83). As Colin Manlove observes, the self of the ego is the source of evil in Lilith (60). Essentially, hell and evil have no positive existence; they are a lack of supreme good caused by self-focus.

Continuing to illustrate the workings of evil in the world, MacDonald dramatizes through Vane’s relationship with the Little Ones that evil is not antecedent to substance but is merely caused by a choice of something that is less good than should have been chosen. When Mr. Raven warns Vane to refuse to complete a task which has been requested by a deceiver and Vane asks what will happen if he does, Raven answers, “‘then some evil that is good for you will follow’” (95). Evil does not exist in the thing itself, but in the relationship of that thing to the Good. Originally, Vane decides not to risk educating the Little Ones because he is unsure about the benefit for them. This impulse to protect them is not inherently evil, but it is just not as good as educating them, as Mr. Raven points out to Vane much later in the story (142). The evil is in choosing to do the less good thing. Evil does not attack the self from outside, but from within. Vane again makes this mistake through his selfishness, when he proudly believes that he knows better than Adam when Adam invites him to lie down in death before any attempted rescue of the Little Ones. Instead of dying and then going to rescue the Little Ones, Vane sets off before his death to educate and save them. The result is the tragic (to Vane) death of Lona and the near-defeat of the Little Ones. Vane’s affectionate yet misguided relationship to the Little Ones reveals how evil is a parasite on goodness picked up through self-focus.

Like Augustine, MacDonald enters deeply into the exploration of the nature of evil through the consideration of a fallen angel, Lilith. According to Augustine, angels are naturally good because they are beings created by God. The fallen angels, however, “have forsaken Him who supremely is, and have turned to themselves who have no such essence” (City 385), which constitutes evil and entry into the hell of the self. Through the Kabbalistic fallen angel, MacDonald illustrates the complete process of creation, fall, and redemption, but focuses in the majority of the novel on the corrupted Lilith, on the time between fall and redemption. Using Lilith to represent that element of society which is evil as Kath Filmer suggests, MacDonald seeks to address the “existence” and eventual end of evil in the universe. Of her creation, Adam recounts the story of God’s gift of Lilith to him:
He brought me an angelic splendor to be my wife: there she lies! For her first thought was power; she counted it slavery to be one with me, and bear children for Him who gave her being. . . . Finding, however, that I would but love and honour, never obey and worship her, she poured out her blood to escape me, fled to the army of the aliens and soon had so ensnared the heart of the great Shadow that he became her slave, wrought her will, and made her queen of Hell. (147-148)

Because a good God created all things and Lilith is part of created substance, Lilith herself was also created good. But she lost that complete goodness when she turned to herself for her identity, refusing to submit to Adam and the God for which Adam was the earthly representative. Instead she sets up herself as God, as the source of herself, demanding worship from Adam.

The evil and corruption of Lilith are represented on the surface of her body by the presence of the shadowy wound, the abscess, which is slowly destroying her by dissolving her substance as it corrupts her body. On Vane’s first encounter with Lilith, he notices the presence of the spot. He describes the figure he sees: “The eyes in the beautiful face were dead, and on her left side was a dark spot, against which she would now and then press her hand” (50). After the white leopardess, the symbol of uncorrupted good, defeats the spotted leopardess, “the spotted one drew herself away, and rose on her hind legs. Erect in the moonlight stood the princess, a confused rush of shadows careering over her whiteness” (135). When Adam discovers that Lilith has followed Vane into the earthly world, she claims that she is beautiful and that the spots have disappeared, but Adam challenges her “‘what is that under thy right hand?’” (149). Obedient yet fiercely reluctant, she reveals the spot and Adam says, “‘It is not on the leopard; it is in the woman! . . . Nor will it leave thee until it hath eaten to thy heart, and thy beauty hath flowed from thee through the open wound’” (149). Yet he beseeches her to “‘repent, and be again an angel of God’” (149). When Vane, seduced by her beauty, is tempted to help her, Adam explains, “‘Nothing will ever close that wound . . . . It must eat into her heart! Annihilation itself is no death to evil. Only good where evil was, is evil dead. An evil thing must live with its evil until it chooses to be good. That alone is the slaying of evil’” (153). Adam’s explanation of the wound reveals that evil and annihilation are synonymous because they are the decay and negation of substance, while good is the return, the completion of substance. Evil can neither die nor be killed because it has no substance; instead, it must be replaced by good. Therefore, death in annihilation is only
more evil. The abscess on Lilith’s body represents the nothingness, the evil, eating into Lilith’s body and soul. Life, and the healing of the wound, can only come through turning to the Good, whose presence will nullify the absence (the abscess), which is evil.

Yet even in this despicable character, evil is not her essence but attacks that essence. Lilith’s night in Mara’s cottage demonstrates that Lilith’s evilness is not part of her substance, but is caused by turning toward herself, refusing to orient herself toward God. Mara asks Lilith, “‘Will you turn away from the wicked things you have been doing so long?’” (199) and Lilith replies, “‘I will not . . . . I will be myself and not another!’” (199), eliding the self and evil and revealing that the evil person turns toward the self and refuses the upward journey. Mara replies, “‘Alas, you are another now, not yourself! Will you not be your real self?’” (199). The “real self” is not found through focus on the self, but through turning to the Good and locating the self in relationship to it. Lilith proclaims to Mara that freed from Mara’s cottage

“I will do as my Self pleases—as my Self desires.”

“You will do as the Shadow, overshadowing your Self inclines you?” (199)

Although Lilith perceives her nature through herself, Mara knows that Lilith’s inherently good nature is distorted by the shadow of turning toward herself instead of the good. Holding tightly to the self, although it is her hell, Lilith rebuffs Mara’s comment that that Self is an illusion:

“What I choose to seem to myself makes me what I am. My own thought makes me me; my own thought of myself is me. Another shall not make me!”

“But another has made you, and can compel you to see what you have made yourself.” (200)

If the created world is the embodiment of God’s thoughts, then Lilith attempts to usurp the position of God when she claims that “my own thought makes me me,” instead of merely trying to think God’s thoughts after him. Lilith sets herself up as her own creator and the center of her universe, revealing her turning away from God and toward herself.

Even this sinister personality is redeemed at the end of the novel, though, further illustrating MacDonald’s universalism. As a creation of God, Lilith still retains her inherent goodness, facilitating her final salvation. Only her will is evil, not her substance. Still in Mara’s cottage, Mara tells Lilith how she will be redeemed:

“There is a light that goes much deeper than the will, a light that
lights up the darkness behind it: that light can change your will, can make it truly yours and not another’s—not the Shadow’s. Into the created can pour itself the creating will, and so redeem it!” (200)

Despite her evil, Lilith can be redeemed when she is set again in proper relationship to the hierarchy of the universe. The light which is coming to Lilith will destroy the shadow and will change Lilith’s narcissistic volition. Only by turning that will and contemplation away from the self will Lilith ever achieve her “real self” (199). When the “creating will,” the ideal thought of God, enters Lilith, she will be redeemed and made more real. After this conversation, the “worm-thing . . . white-hot, vivid as incandescent silver, the live heart of essential fire” crawls into Lilith’s abscess and reveals herself to her, placing her in the “‘hell of her self-consciousness’” (201), while beginning the restoration of her body and her soul.

Yet Lilith’s resistance, MacDonald’s testament to the stubbornness of the human spirit, to the coming of that light, leads her to the edge of annihilation, the edge of complete evil through dissolution of substance. After she has seen herself through the light of God, she still refuses to turn away from herself, to “restore that which [she has] wrongfully taken” (203). Her refusal to turn toward God leads her to the brink of annihilation. Watching her, Vane notices an invisible darkness, a something more terrible than aught that had yet made itself felt. A horrible Nothingness, a Negation positive, infolded her; the border of its being that was yet no being, touched me, and for one ghastly instant I seemed alone with Death Absolute! It was not the absence of everything I felt, but the presence of Nothing. . . . It was the recoil of Being from Annihilation. (204)

The culmination of her turning away from God and towards herself is “horrible Nothingness, Negation positive” resulting in utter “Annihilation.” The more evil she is, the less real she becomes. Ultimately, if she chooses to continue to turn toward the self, that self will be completely destroyed in Annihilation, in Death Absolute, which is the end of being altogether, the absence of the good substance which God created. Yet because she has some being, some goodness, left in her, she rejects Annihilation.

After this brush with Annihilation, Lilith waveringly begins the upward process of the right relationship to God only to fall even lower. Knowing “the one that God had intended her to be, the other that she had
made herself” (204), she neither wants to be what she has made herself nor does she want to turn her will toward God. Lilith’s defiance returns strongly and she undergoes the “most fearful thing of all... *Life in Death*—life dead, yet existent” (205). When she is in this state, Vane realizes that in her self-centeredness and self-absorption she is truly the “queen of Hell” (206). He notes that “the source of life had withdrawn itself; all that was left her of conscious being was the dregs of her dead and corrupted life” (206) and that she was now “what God could not have created” (206). All that remains is the self willed by Lilith—a self without life or goodness because severed from God, the “source of life.” Through this agony, Lilith finally turns toward God after he has left her, by trying to open her hand (207). Her turning away from herself is represented in the tears that she sheds, beginning to release the waters that she had pulled into herself in her selfishness.

Yet even in her repentance Lilith believes she is ending her suffering through some kind of catatonic, ignorant existence away from God, the center of the universe. Although she has already experienced this kind of death in her experience of Annihilation, she tells Adam that “‘I cried out for Death—to escape Him and thee!’” (214). But this understanding of death as a cessation, that death cannot be good in any way, is false. Instead, as Adam says to Lilith, “Cease thou canst not: wilt thou not be restored and *be*?” (214). To die in the right sense is to *be* more fully than the person has ever been. To turn away from self in dying is to attain a higher level of existence as the person moves closer to God. For MacDonald, death is not an escape from the earthly physical world but a completion of it through an increase of substance.

Vane’s eventual death cements the goodness of MacDonald’s conception of death as not some kind of evil annihilation but as a fulfillment and expansion of good life. When Vane awakes, he sees Lona waiting for him. He notes that “she fell asleep a girl; she awoke a woman, ripe with the loveliness of the life essential” (238). Through her death, Lona, instead of deteriorating, increases in reality and, because of that, she increases in loveliness as she progresses in her upward journey toward God. After his waking, he also meets Adam who tells him that “‘you have died into life, and will die no more; you have only to keep dead... Now you have only to live, and that you must, with all your blessed might. The more you live, the stronger you become to live’” (238). In his upward journey, Vane will continue to gain reality as he lives strongly with ever-increasing strength. Eve tells him that

*“the* Life keeps generating ours.—Those who will not die, die
many times, die constantly, keep dying deeper, never have done dying; here all is upwardness and love and gladness.” (239)

This life-after-death, this life-in-death, is characterized by “upwardness,” as the person moves closer and closer to “The Life” which gives him existence. The remainder of Vane’s life in the fantastic dreamland is his joyful journey to heaven, the “Journey Home” (243), where “it had ceased to be dark” and “nothing cast a shadow, all things interchanged a little light” (243). Here “every growing thing showed [him], by its shape and colour, its indwelling idea—the informing thought, that is, which was its being, and sent it out” (243). Because things are closer to the Thinker, they are more real by emitting more clearly the idea which is behind them. But he recognizes that “something more than the sun, greater than the light, is coming, is coming . . . . He is coming, is coming” (245). Vane wanders through the wonderful heaven with Lona, marveling at its beauty and reality and longing to meet him whose “substance and radiance were human” (248).

The great joy in Vane’s death-into-life is not limited only to himself, but will be shared by everything in existence, including the Shadow. Even the Shadow himself, because he has that tiny two-dimensional scrap of substance, will eventually enter the house of death and begin the upward journey toward life. Eve tells Lilith that the only way the Shadow will enter the house of the dead is to “‘lie down and sleep also—His hour will come, and he knows it will’” (218). The negation of good, the Shadow who has almost lost his existence because of that evil, will eventually die into life, substance, and move toward the Good. Once everything is caught in the net of the good death, it will move toward God, toward the real. Augustinian theology and cosmology explain why the Shadow, the Devil, can be redeemed through his turning away from himself and towards God. The ultimate redemption of the Shadow reveals the strength of MacDonald’s universalism, a universalism built on the Augustinian conception of evil as the privation of good balanced with the belief in the value of the physical world as part of the good substance of God’s creation.

In the final pages of the novel, Vane, like Anodos does in Phantastes, returns to the real world, to his library, where he takes up the journey again. Yet despite his longing to be with Lona, he willingly remains in this world, saying that “‘all the days of my appointed time will I wait till my change come’” (251). He looks at the created things around him and sometimes, when he looks “they seem to waver as if a wind rippled their solid mass, and another world were about to break through” (251). Within the Platonic context, the
good of the other world implies the evil of this world. However, within the
text’s Augustinian conception of the good of the created world and of evil
as the privation of good, this idealism allows a celebration both of the world
at which Vane looks and the world which almost breaks through the earthly
screen. Through the Augustinian conception of evil and the goodness of the
universe, Phantastes and Lilith point to a reconciliation of materialism and
idealism, the kind of breakdown of binaries which MacDonald celebrated.
Despite MacDonald’s increased focus on evil in Lilith, he continues to
affirm the goodness of this world presented in Phantastes, while he longs
for the imminent death of an old man. Ultimately, Lilith is not a riddle as
Robb suggests (MacDonald 97), but is itself a solution to the paradox of
MacDonald’s personal belief in the goodness of the world and his longing for
death.

Endnote
1. Deirdre Hayward argues that the “Seven-fold Pattern of Existence” theology is
taken directly from the German mystic Jacob Boehme. In Boehme’s theology, man
goes through seven specific levels, which exist within himself, before he achieves
oneness with God.

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