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The Death of the Narrator in George MacDonald's *Lilith*

Inbar Kaminsky

George MacDonald's *Lilith* was first published in 1895, towards the end of the Victorian age in England. The novel's entangled fictional worlds and unconventional narration has drawn the attention of common readers and scholars alike. In fact, this seminal novel is also the subject of *Lilith in a New Light*, an edited volume of scholarly essays devoted to the analysis of *Lilith*'s unusual narrative structure. As its introduction suggests, *Lilith in a New Light* offers various analytical approaches in relation to the novel's puzzling structure, such as liminality, mythopoeia, metafiction, Barthes's writerly text, Jungian psychology and personified postmodernity (1-5).

In essence, the plot of *Lilith* is conveyed to the reader through the first person narration of Mr. Vane, a young aristocrat who has inherited the mansion of his ancestors. However, near the end of *Lilith*, the reader encounters a strange event—the narrator dies, yet his narration continues:

I heard as one in a dream. I was very cold, but already the cold caused me no suffering. I felt them put on me the white garment of the dead. Then I forgot everything. The night about me was pale with sleeping faces, but I was asleep also, nor knew that I slept.
(MacDonald 229-30)

Lilith portrays the death of the narrator without stopping his narration, thus breaking the literary illusion of the narrator as an independent voice. This textual subversion is the fundamental rupture in the consistency of the plot, which essentially sends the reader on a quest to find other authority figures in order to fill this void; the death of the narrator compels the reader to rethink the death of the author.

Roland Barthes emphasizes this intrinsic link between the function of the author and the function of the narrator: "Linguistically, the author is nothing but the one who writes, just as *I* is nothing but the one who says *I*: language knows a 'subject,' not a 'person,' and this subject, empty outside of the very speech-act which defines it, suffices to 'hold' language, i.e., to exhaust it" (51). Moreover, Michel Foucault proclaims that a two-phase process has taken place throughout literary history. The first phase concerns the protagonist's immortality, achieved by his death:

The second theme, writing's relationship with death, is even more

familiar. This link subverts an old tradition exemplified by the Greek epic, which was intended to perpetuate the immortality of the hero: if he is willing to die young, it was so that his life, consecrated and magnified by death, might pass into immortality; the narrative then redeemed this accepted death. (*Author* 102)

The second phase concerns the author's death: "The work, which once had the duty of providing immortality, now possesses the right to kill, to be its author's murderer" (Foucault, *Author* 102). This process is similar to the twofold development that takes place in *Lilith*: the death of Vane, the dramatized narrator, forces the reader to reconsider the death of the author.

Foucault endorses the notion that the reader must embark on a quest in order to fill the void, which has been created by an empty function:

It is not enough, however, to repeat the empty affirmation that the author has disappeared. For the same reason, it is not enough to keep repeating (after Nietzsche) that God and man have died a common death. Instead, we must locate the space left empty by the author's disappearance, follow the distribution of gaps and breaches, and watch for the opening that this disappearance uncovers. (*Author* 105)

The quest that the reader takes upon himself or herself while reading *Lilith* is both futile, in terms of the text itself, and valuable, in terms of the reader's comprehension of the narratives that surround him or her. No new meaning can possibly arise from the reader's attempt to assign a textual authority to *Lilith*, yet through this process of elimination of authority figures, the reader eventually can come to terms with their absence:

The space of writing is to be traversed, not pierced; writing constantly posits meaning, but always in order to evaporate it; writing seeks a systematic exemption of meaning. Thereby, literature (it would be better, from now on, to say writing), by refusing to assign to text (and to the world-as-text) a "secret," i.e., an ultimate meaning, liberates an activity we may call countertheological, properly revolutionary, for to refuse to halt meaning is finally to refuse God and his hypostases, reason, science, the law. (Barthes 54)

The first indication of this process resides in the beginning of the novel, when the narrator approaches the reader and asks him or her to be an active participant:

I beg my reader to aid me in the endeavor to make myself intelligible—if here understanding be indeed possible between us. I was in a world, or call it a state of things, an economy of conditions,

an idea of existence, so little correspondent with the ways and modes of this world – which we are apt to think the only world, that the best choice I can make of word or phrase is but an adumbration of what I would convey. (MacDonald 12)

This direct request leads the reader to question the unorthodox role that the narrator designates for him or her, and the subsequent admission of the narrator regarding his limited ability to convey what had really happened enforces the need for this role. As the reader becomes more involved in the plot, he or she comes across literary devices that weaken the position of the narrator, such as the structural and generic implication of time collapsing into space, the theme of inadequacy of language and the theme of external knowledge versus self-knowledge. This deterioration in the status of the narrator also propels the reader to search for other authority figures in relation to the literary text, namely the author

Other scholars have remarked on the importance of death as one of the narrator's most troubling dilemmas within the fictional worlds of *Lilith*, “where much of the action takes place in a vast cemetery whose sexton is Adam, also known as Mr. Raven; the action largely consists in persuading Mr. Vane, the narrator and main protagonist, to lie down and die” (Gray 2). Furthermore, the theme of death inevitably leads to the question of purgatory and the narrator's diminished capacity at perceiving it, mainly because “For MacDonald, hell was not so much a place as a state, which he illustrated in *Lilith* . . . Vane is able to stand alongside Mr. Raven as he explains that though neither of them is in hell, the skeletons whom they observe are” (Dearborn 165).

From unreliability to limited capacity, many flaws have been attributed to the narrator of *Lilith* in an attempt to explain his unorthodox function. Kaitlyn Dryer, for instance, maintains that “in *Lilith*, parallel worlds can be perceived at once, and are perceived at the same time by Mr. Raven, but our narrator lacks the capacity” (90). The narrator's limited scope is added to the issue of his overall unreliability, which Dryer believes to be related to the reader's separate quest:

Readers operate from a perspective outside of that of their unreliable narrator; nevertheless, they embark on a parallel journey. In the course of the novel, their senses of identity and perception shift to make room for MacDonald's framework of interrelated realities so that, at the close of the novel, they have been introduced to a new way of seeing that they can also use in life. (67)

In other words, it is clear that the narrator's perceived limitations serve as a strong incentive for the reader's active role in the search for other authority figures.

Time and Space

The relation between time and space has been conceptualized by M.M. Bakhtin as the chronotope, "the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationship that are artistically expressed in literature" (84). *Lilith* displays a unique chronotope that directly corresponds with the crisis of faith of the Victorian age. Erin Sheley adds that "amidst the many religious doubts of the nineteenth century, a central anxiety concerned the validity of biblical time" (330). Sheley explores two central issues of this debate that concern the disparity between biblical depictions of time and Victorian scientific evidence by maintaining that "neither the rapid creation of the earth nor the excessive longevity of the patriarchs could be reconciled with the observable facts of the contemporary world or with geological evidence" (330).

MacDonald attempts to reconcile these contradictions through the subversion of time; the chronology of the Bible is forsaken and instead the narrative takes a leap from the book of *Genesis* of *The Old Testament*, which depicts the life of Adam and Eve in Eden, straight to the book of *Revelations* of *The New Testament*, which "concentrates on depicting the end of Creation, the war between good and evil, the Day of Judgment, and the ultimate triumph of good" (*Oxford Reference Online*). Sheley addresses MacDonald's temporal leap as a new typology:

For MacDonald, Fairyland is "Eden-land," and the means of accessing it involves the crossing of temporal, as well as physical, boundaries. Like Ruskin, MacDonald works simultaneously with the beginning and the end of the Bible. With Adam and Eve as the stewards of Mr. Vane's resurrection, however, MacDonald's typology is something new altogether. Gone is the entire chronology between the flood and the resurrection—a span which, of course, includes the time of actual human history. (341)

Moreover, one might say that time is subverted to the extent that it simply collapses into space. This notion can be demonstrated on two levels of the narrative, thematic and structural; the theme of place is shown through Mr. Vane's repeated questions regarding his whereabouts, his obsession with space can be interpreted as a desperate wish to cling to the only identity he can acknowledge; his library. Rosemary Jackson relates a similar notion:

“Throughout *Lilith*, a topography of labyrinthine passages, wasteland, doors opening to emptiness, graveyards, mirrors, constitutes the internal ‘space’ which Vane occupies” (149).

In terms of structure, the debates relating to place are uttered in the course of a dialogue and therefore arranged by scene, which Gerard Genette defines as one of the fundamental forms of duration: “The dramatic *scene*, especially the dialogue, when narrative and historical time are supposed to be nearly equal” (30). This form of duration presents a moment where story time and discourse time essentially cancel each other. The following passages illustrate a clear pattern of engaging in the issue of space while structurally freezing time:

“I never saw any door” I persisted.

“Of course not” he returned; “all the doors you had yet seen – and you haven’t seen many—were doors in; here you came upon a door out! The strange thing to you,” he went on thoughtfully, “will be, that the more doors you go out of, the further you get in!”

“Oblige me by telling me where I am.”

“That is impossible. You know nothing about whereness.

The only way to come to know where you are is to begin to make yourself at home.” (MacDonald 13)

“Perhaps it may comfort you,” said the raven, “to be told that you have not yet left your house, neither has your house left you. At the same time it cannot contain you, or you inhabit it!”

“I do not understand you,” I replied. “Where am I?” (MacDonald 21)

“Will you not in pity tell me what I am to do—where I must go?”

“How should I tell your to-do, or the way to it?”

“If I am not to go home, at least direct me to some of my kind.”

“I do not know of any. The beings most like you are in that direction.” He pointed with his beak. I could see nothing but the setting sun, which blinded me.

“Well,” I said bitterly, “I cannot help feeling hardly treated – taken from my home, abandoned in a strange world, and refused instruction as to where I am to go or what I am to do!” (45-6)

Temporality is also significant in the discussion of authorship; Barthes claims that “time, first of all, is no longer the same. The Author, when we believe in him, is always conceived as the past of his own book” (52). In *Lilith*, the reader’s search for authority figures compels him or her to reconsider the temporality of the author because his existence has to be placed within the

chronological scale of time in order to be comprehensible.

In addition, the significance of the chronotope in regards to genre is a well established axiom, as Bakhtin explains: “The chronotope in literature has an intrinsic generic significance. It can even be said that it precisely the chronotope that defines genre and generic distinctions, for in literature the primary category in the chronotope is time” (84-5). The unique chronotope of *Lilith* has unusual generic implications because the Gothic framing of Christian allegory creates a form of generic tension, as Sheley indicates: In this novel, MacDonald drops the device of fairyland entirely and sends his narrator, Mr. Vane, through a hidden chamber in his ancestral home into a biblical allegorical world, where Adam and Eve show him the path towards salvation” (338).

In fact, gothic fiction belongs to literature of subversion, which “has to do with inverting elements of this world, re-combining its constitutive features in new relations to produce something strange, unfamiliar and apparently ‘new’, absolutely ‘other’ and different” (Jackson 8). However, allegory belongs to literature of affirmation, didactic literature that is set out to teach the reader. Jackson conveys the consequences of this generic tension:

MacDonald’s fantasies betray dissatisfaction with the real and seek something other. They fill emptiness with a magical, divine plenitude. Yet a strange melancholy remains, as his hollow characters arrive at their ideal vision. Their ideals lie beyond the mirror, or through the north wind, in a landscape of death. (150)

Thus the narrator’s ideals are never realized, the resurrection is put into question as Vane returns to the secondary world, and this doubt casts a shadow over Vane’s abilities, reminding the reader of Vane’s limited scope:

In moments of doubt I cry,
 “Could God Himself create such lovely things as I dreamed?”
 “Whence then came thy dream?” answers Hope.
 “Out of my dark self, into the light of my consciousness.”
 (MacDonald 251)

Yet another possibility of generic distinction is provided by Michael Mendelson, who sees *Lilith* primarily as a “romance of ascent” (198), much like Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. Mendelson defines this genre as “an invented myth based on a structure of Christian allegory in which the journey’s goal is the return of mankind to its ultimate source in the creator” (198), but adds, in relation to *Lilith*, that “MacDonald’s ascent also involves a paradoxical fall into horror and alienation” (198). The reader’s role does not

elude Mendelson, who concludes that the reader is privileged to his own perspective in the focal points of the narrative, where the narrator travels from one fictional world to another:

The major structural phases within *Lilith's* ritualized procession may be referred to as the “entry into the other world,” the “adventures,” and the “vision”; and these narrative events, along with the conventions and symbols that collect around them, provide our own point of entry. (198)

Whether as gothic framing of Christian allegory or as a romance of ascent, it is clear that the various approaches to *Lilith's* genre emphasize the unusually dynamic function of the reader throughout the reading experience.

The Inadequacy of Language

Another element that undermines the position of the narrator as an authority figure is the theme of the inadequacy of language. The narrator's preoccupation with language and literature undergoes a conceptual transformation throughout the novel. It begins as a life force of which Mr. Vane is an enthusiastic consumer:

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. (MacDonald 6)

At the same time, the narrator also conveys images that are emblematic of literature as a form of sensory deception: “Happening, as I sat reading, to raise my eyes from the page, my glance fell upon this door, and at once I saw that the book described, if book it may be called, was gone” (MacDonald 7). The following passage is another example of this theme:

I had a great liking for the masked door. To complete the illusion of it, some inventive workman apparently had shoved in, on the top of one of the rows, a part of a volume thin enough to lie between it and the bottom of the next shelf: he had cut away diagonally a considerable portion, and fixed the remnant with one of its open corners projecting beyond the book-backs. (7)

However, when the narrator moves into the tertiary world, these metaphors and images become unmistakably intentional: “I heard a soft scurry, a little rustle, and then a silence—for in that world some silences are heard” (163).

Both dead books and heard silences are powerful metaphors that convey the failure of language in the tertiary world:

I felt as if the treasure of the universe were giving itself to me—put out my hand, and had it. But the instant I took it, its light went out; all was dark as pitch, a dead book with boards outspread lay cold and heavy in my hand. (47)

Certain images even escalate as to explicitly represent the inadequacy of language, as MacDonald describes: “That some had been dead for ages I knew, not merely by their unutterable repose, but by something for which I have neither word nor symbol” (34). Another example in which language is treated as an obstacle can be found in the following passage:

“How can a pigeon be a prayer?” I said. “I understand, of course, how it should be a fit symbol or likeness for one; but a live pigeon to come out of a heart!”

“It must puzzle you! It cannot fail to do so!”

“A prayer is a thought, a thing spiritual!” I pursued. (25)

This transformation relates to the removal of authority figures in the tertiary world. The language loses its meaning because the representative of the culture that has assigned its meaning, the narrator, is essentially gone, as the memories of his identity are suspended. Moreover, when Vane returns to the secondary world, this attitude is preserved and he regards books as empty vessels: “Now and then, when I look round on my books, they seem to waver as if a wind rippled their solid mass, and another world were about to break through” (251).

In addition, Foucault argues that “a good many people, I imagine, harbor a similar desire to be freed from the obligation to begin, a similar desire to find themselves, right from the outside, on the other side of discourse, without having to stand outside it, pondering its particular, fearsome, and even devilish features” (*Discourse* 215). I argue that Vane also wishes to avoid this linguistic contemplation; he does not embrace the raven’s alternative language because by pointing out the flaws of human language, the raven has created a contempt for languages, which paradoxically casts a shadow over God’s language as well.

The book that bridges both worlds, a whole that can create the illusion of partiality, must be of divine nature, yet Vane is astonished by the presence of this book:

He rose, went to the door of the closet, brought from it the mutilated volume, and sat down again beside me. I stared at the book in his

hand: it was a whole book, entire and sound!

“Where was the other half of it?” I gasped.

“Sticking through into my library,” he answered. (MacDonald 143)

However, Vane remains indifferent to the new language that the book introduces, a dialect that is both linguistically unfamiliar and emotionally comprehensible; the language of God:

But what follows represents—not what he read, only the impression it made upon me. The poem seemed in a language I had never before heard, which yet I understood perfectly, although I could not write the words, or give their meaning save in poor approximation. These fragments, then, are the shapes which those he read have finally taken in passing again through my brain. (144)

Interestingly enough, the idea that the narrator expresses echoes Kabbalistic practices; the ability to observe letters for their shapes rather than their linguistic functions has been performed in Jewish mysticism using Hebrew letters as a form of mediation. The importance of letters, and paradoxically, their failure to create meaning due to their status as sacred entities is echoed throughout *Lilith*.

External Knowledge versus Self Knowledge

It is hardly a coincidence that the first chapter of *Lilith* is entitled “The Library.” Out of all the different features of the house, Vane chooses to depict the only place that appeals to him:

The house as well as the family was of some antiquity, but no description of it is necessary to the understanding of my narrative. It contained a fine library, whose growth began before the invention of printing, and had continued to my own time, greatly influenced, of course, by changes of taste and pursuit. (5)

Vane further discloses that the house has become a monumental library rather than a living space; it is an image of the library as a conquering force: “The library, although duly considered in many alterations of the house and additions to it, had nevertheless, like an encroaching state, absorbed one room after another until it occupied the greater part of the ground floor” (6). As opposed to Vane’s library in the secondary world, the concept of library as a storeroom of knowledge is mocked in the tertiary world. First, a library is compared to a tomb: “Must I go to sleep among the unwaking, with no one to rouse me? Was this the sexton’s library? Were these his books?” (33). Second, there is a library for those who cannot read: “There is an ancient

poem in the library of the palace, I am told, which of course no one there can read . . .” (76). Third, the mind of Lilith is presented as a living library, where the narrator can freely walk: “As I stood trembling beside the cage, I knew that in the black ellipsoid I had been in the brain of the princess!” (137).

The theme of knowledge is also intrinsically linked to the concept of the irrelevance of names. Vane’s interactions with the tertiary world strongly resembles the author’s interactions with the world of writing, as conceptualized by Barthes: “Writing is that neuter, that composite, that obliquity into which our subject flees, the black-and-white where all identity is lost, beginning with the very identity of the body that writes” (49). Accordingly, Vane loses his sense of self in the tertiary world and is taught that names are irrelevant:

“You would not hear them. Neither people knows its own name!”

“Strange!”

“Perhaps so! But hardly anyone anywhere knows his own name! It would make many a fine gentleman stare to hear himself addressed by what his really his name!”

I held my peace, beginning to wonder what my name might be.

“What now do you fancy yours?” she went on, as if aware of my thought. “But, pardon me, it is a matter of no consequence.”

I had actually opened my mouth to answer her, when I discovered that my name was gone from me. I could not even recall the first letter of it! This was the second time I had been asked my name and could not tell it!

“Never mind,” she said; it is not wanted. Your real name, indeed, is written on your forehead, but at present it whirls about so irregularly that nobody can read it.” (MacDonald 74)

Another parallel can be drawn between the way in which the narrator attributes knowledge and intent to raven/Adam and the manner in which the reader attributes knowledge and intent to the actual writer of a literary text:

“Tell me, please, who am I such as?” I said.

“I cannot make my friend the subject of conversion,” he answered, with a smile.

“But when that friend is present!” I urged.

“I decline the more strongly,” he rejoined.

“But when that friend asks you!” I persisted

“Then most positively I refuse,” he returned.

“Why?”

“Because he and I would be talking of two persons as if they were one and the same. Your consciousness of yourself and my knowledge of you are far apart!” (94-5)

While Vane seeks the raven’s knowledge regarding his own identity, the reader commonly makes the same mistake in seeking knowledge from the actual writer in order to interpret the literary text, which leads Barthes to declare that “to assign an Author to a text is to impose a break on it, to furnish it with a final signified, to close writing” (53).

These analogies raise a valid question regarding the possible contradiction between the narrator’s similarities to the actual writer and the actual reader. Yet, these functions have much in common in relation to the literary text and thus their link to the narrator does not create a conflict. The actual writer and the actual reader are both external to the text, both flesh and blood people who know nothing about one another and therefore communicate through mediating functions; the implied author is invented for the disposal of the readers and the implied reader is invented for the disposal of the writer.

As opposed to the attribution of knowledge, which the novel deems as futile, self knowledge can be attained under certain conditions, as Bonnie Gaarden asserts that “the suffering caused by unwanted self-knowledge is also an inextricable part of spiritual growth for MacDonald” (22). Thus according to *Lilith*, the painful act of self-knowledge is only possible in the tertiary world of Christian allegory, where agonizing introspection is inevitable, posits Gaarden: “Before one can repent of sin and thrust it from oneself, one must see the sin in oneself, in all its ugliness. This is a major component of purgatorial agony, and is graphically pictured in *Lilith*. (22)

Thematic Tension

The theme of evocative names plays a significant role in the overall dynamics of the central ideas of the text. The narrator’s name, Vane, has two possible meanings, which seems to signify the duality of his character. One interpretation is that of a weather vane, a device used to tell the direction of the wind; this interpretation is ironic, given the fact that throughout most of the narrative Vane is lost in a strange land and constantly seeks direction from others. Another possible interpretation is presented by Jackson, who claims that “as his name suggests, Vane’s world is inseparable from his self-absorption. Like Dorian Gray, he is trapped by his narcissism” (149).

In addition, another main character in the novel has several names:

Adam, for instance, first appears to Vane as the ghost of the ancient librarian who late claims to have read all the books in Vane's enormous library; thus he is a repository of human culture through the ages. He next appears as a raven—a bird that has negative as well as positive associations; it is the devil's bird, cursed for not returning to Noah's ark, the bird of the underworld, but also the bird sacred to Apollo and the God-sent bringer of food to Elijah the Tishbite. (Gaarden 24)

Furthermore, by using the name Lilith, MacDonald employs a Kabalistic myth as inspiration for one of the central characters of the novel as well as its title. Gaarden describes the origin of this myth:

In kabalistic tradition she [Lilith] was Adam's first wife, created like Adam of the earth, who rebelled against the inferior position in intercourse and the subservience it implied, and left him. When a hundred of her demon children were killed as punishment, in revenge she became a slayer of infants and seducer of sleeping men. (23)

Gaarden also examines the representation of this myth in the novel: "The princess is Lilith, the 'angelic splendor' that was Adam's first wife, who, after Adam refused to worship her, committed suicide and espoused the great shadow, who made her queen of Hell" (23).

While creating an allusion to Genesis, these biblical names also create thematic tension with several central ideas embodied in the text, most notably with the irrelevance of names. Yet, two other major themes stand in opposition to the theme of evocative names—external knowledge versus self knowledge and the inadequacy of language. Names are external knowledge that is placed upon a person or character; this is extremely true in the case of evocative names, where an entire different text is placed upon a character via the allusion, which dictates at least part of the characterization. The inconsistency is clear since the text also advocates for self knowledge rather than to external knowledge. In addition, evocative names imply that one word is enough to signify an entire story, to which the allusion refers to, yet the theme of the inadequacy of language points to the contrary. This friction between themes compels the reader to think beyond the narrative itself and search for a unifying figure which would harmonically embody all the ideas of the text—the implied author. Yet, the reader's task does not end with the implied author, as it should, since this figure is obviously flawed. The reader is therefore induced to seek out the actual writer, only to discover the impossibility of this task and finally resort to himself or herself as a source of

knowledge.

Finally, Barthes claims that “the reader is the very space in which are inscribed, without any of them being lost, all of the citations out of which a writing is made; the unity of a text is not in its origin but in its destination . . .” (54). The reader, who has taken the spiritual journey alongside the narrator in the search for authority figures, should look no further than him or herself; the reader is the resurrected human: “We know that in order to restore writing to its future, we must reverse the myth: the birth of the reader must be requited by the death of the Author” (Barthes 55).

In conclusion, the generic and thematic frictions displayed throughout *Lilith* set the stage for the ambiguity of the narrator’s death. All these breadcrumbs lead the reader on a quest to find the God of the text, yet, much like the narrator, the reader finds himself standing on the other side of resurrection, unsatisfied. I assert that *Lilith* is not a novel about faith but rather about the need for faith, the human desire to believe in absolute knowledge and power. The reader is indeed empowered by the realization that the only knowledge that can be obtained is self knowledge, yet the implied concession is clear; the resurrected man stands alone, as self reliance replaces the comforting image of God.

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