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Michael Mendelson

George MacDonald's *Lilith*
and the Conventions of Ascent



Lilith (1895) is George MacDonald's premier work of symbolic fiction, a narrative form in which he has few rivals. C.S. Lewis refers to MacDonald as the preeminent genius of mythopoetic fantasy, and Auden asserts that *Lilith* is "equal if not superior to the best of Poe." Other distinguished readers include H.G. Wells, G.K. Chesterton, T.S. Eliot and J.R.R. Tolkien, all of whom seemed to have borrowed from MacDonald. More recently, Steven Prickett has claimed in *Victorian Fantasy* that MacDonald is perhaps the greatest fantasy-writer of the Victorian ("or any other") period.¹ Yet despite the general acknowledgment that MacDonald has made a major contribution to the development of non-realistic fiction, *Lilith* itself has been the subject of very little critical commentary.²

This scarcity of critical response is unfortunate given the symbolic richness of Macdonald's narrative methods and the challenges they offer for interpretation. A 1924 editorial in the *TLS* speaks to the essential point about the work when the author writes that *Lilith* is "so packed with meanings, so full of images of which the meanings seem inexhaustible, that it is

marvellous to see how MacDonald keeps it, as a story moving, and is ever ready with some new and strange vehicle of beautiful or grotesque imagination."³ The comment identifies what is likely to be the reader's initial response: amazement at the inventiveness of MacDonald's imagination and yet perhaps an uncertainty as to the signification of this dense fabric of highly charged imagery. Under such circumstances, the reader as well as the hero must descend into a "silva oscura" where, as we are told, "a single thing would sometimes seem to be and mean many things, with an uncertain identity at the heart of them which kept altering their look."⁴ Nevertheless, the informed reader is not without some guidelines for elucidating *Lilith's* complexities; for while the manifold conceptual reverberations generated by the work's symbolism may initially frustrate certainty, these interpretive difficulties can be minimized by foregrounding the major generic conventions that inform the work and organize its structural functions and image groups. It is the structural features of prose romance, then, that will herein serve as a heuristic guide to this fictive "other world."

Lilith is fundamentally a romance of ascent.⁵ Like the great upward journeys of Dante, Bunyan and Blake, MacDonald's romance is 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. But MacDonald's ascent also involves a paradoxical fall into horror and alienation: as Eliot has it, "the way down is the way up." The structure of this ascent, like the conventional tri-part pattern of quest romance in general (departure, adventure, return), includes a preliminary descent, followed by struggles in a dark and sinister other world and a halting progression back from the lower world to a higher one. This ritualized procession is the formal corollary of an "implicit theodicy" in which the chthonic demons of evil, death and selfhood must be encountered before the peripeteia of ascent can begin.⁶ It is the narrative working out of the notion of *deus absconditus sub contrario*. 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.

The romance centers on the other world adventures of a student who has just graduated from Oxford and is taking up

residence for the first time on an estate he has inherited from his long-deceased father. The situation is a familiar one in 19th-century romance: John Melmoth, Edward Waverley and David Balfour of *Kidnapped* all begin their adventures by returning to the ancestral seat, and in all cases the return initiates a rite of passage in which youth seeks to explore the obscurities of its heritage. MacDonald's Mr. Vane is both a recluse, "as much alone in the world as a man might find himself" (p. 187), and an intellectual who delights especially in theoretical and metaphysical studies. Beyond these rudimentary characteristics, we know little about Mr. Vane; his appearance, his past, his quirks of manner and feeling, all those elements that go into filling out a character with individual life are attenuated in favor of romance's customary tendency to generalize its protagonist. He is, in short, a "type" hero, both in the literary sense of a universal representative of human character and in the Jungian sense of a "thinking" type with an introverted orientation. It is this latter characteristic, the hero's inclination towards introspection, that makes him such a suitable candidate for this unusually cerebral adventure.

Vane's adventures begin immediately when he is led by the conventional figure of the supernatural animal-guide across an unusual barrier and into an "unknown region." Such an event traditionally marks the transfer of the hero's "spiritual center of gravity from within the pale of his society to a zone unknown."⁷ Just what the nature of this zone is remains to be indicated by the matrix of the individual images with which the author fills out the entry. In this case, the symbol that organizes the episode is that of the great house.⁸ Following his guide, the Raven, Vane leaves his comfortable library and ascends a winding stairway to an expansive garret that he describes as "the brooding brain of the building" (p. 197). Though there is not the direct allegory here of Spenser's Castle of Alma, this image is one of a cluster that unmistakably connects the garret with the hero's own mind and helps to signify the cognitive nature of the impending journey. The winding stair, MacDonald remarked to his son, had always fascinated him as an analogy to "our own 'secret stair' leading up to the wider vision."⁹ Expanded vision is the eventual goal of this romance quest, and the hero here begins his journey by climbing just such a secret stair up into a territory that lies, he imagines, "at the heart of my brain" (p. 198).

The distinct point at which the hero crosses into the fabulous realm is an old mirror, an image that serves to expand the notion of the other world as a unique plane of perception. Since the reflecting pool of Narcissus, the mirror has been an analogue for the self; and in this romance, the hero, by entering into the mirror's image, is initiating the principal Romantic quest: the search for the true self. But in MacDonald the quest pattern is extended, since this mirror will prove to be a passage both into and beyond the self. Once across the threshold, the Raven (now the traditional mystagogue) tells Vane that he has just "come through the door" (p. 194). When the hero protests that a mirror is not a door, the Raven replies that the only doors that Vane knows are "doors in," whereas this, the mirror, is a "door out." The hero's name now serves to indicate the vanity of his self-centered life: he has spent his time going "into" rather than "out of" himself. As a result, he is unaware that, as MacDonald states elsewhere, "the being of which we are conscious, is not our full self."¹⁰ The mirror, then, is not simply the portal of a *passage intérieure* like that of Shelley's Alastor who descends into a Caucasus of self-absorption and unfulfilled desires. Rather, this mirror opens onto a world which both encompasses and transcends the strictly personal projections of the individual "mental traveller," a world of mythological scope in which a man may reach an unimagined "fullness." To enter into the mirror is paradoxically, then, the first stage of the adventure of passing beyond, or "out of," ego-centrism.

To clarify this transformation of a personal journey begun within the private recesses of the individual mind into timeless mythological adventure, it is perhaps helpful to note briefly that MacDonald's epistemology involves the interpenetration of individual and divine mind. The "offspring" of human imagination, MacDonald writes, have their ultimate origin in God: "man is rather 'being thought' than 'thinking.'" This view in no way ameliorates the horrific force of individual fantasy, and MacDonald's acknowledgment of the often brutal and libidinous projections of the imagination is made clear in his own fiction. But instead of finding that the phantasmagoric images spring *sui generis* from "the dark portion of our being," he believes that "God sits in that chamber of our being in which the candle goes out in darkness and sends from thence wonderful gifts into the light." In MacDonald's dialectical system, even the

most threatening imaginings of the individual mind are, under the sanctions of their divine origin, the agents of eventual benefits: "I never met a witch," he writes, "whose influence did not turn to good."¹¹ Within the realm of fiction, these views on the incorporation of the individual within the divine mind dictate that the hero who passes into the other world of imaginative thought will not only face the matter of his own fantasy but will also encounter eternal forms and history *sub species aeternitatis*.

Once across this boundary, Vane finds himself in a strange locale that causes him to wonder if he is "in a world" or whether it might rather be "a state of things, an economy of conditions, an idea of existence" (p. 194). This problem of context is partly one of language, since "the best choice I can make of word or phrase," says Vane, "is but an adumbration of what I would convey" (p. 194). Without taking up the complicated subject of the nature of symbolic language directly, it is worth noting that the insufficiency of speech in this case is the result of an imbalance between the *plurium sensuum* of *res* on the one hand ("a single thing would sometimes seem to be and mean many things), and the reductive singularity of *verba* on the other.¹² Yet however polysemous the symbolic forms with which MacDonald conducts his narrative discourse in *Lilith*, his language is conventional in the sense that it serves to set the other world apart from the ordinary even at the level of *lexis*. But regardless of the intricacies of language, the central issue, as one character puts it, is "locality": "we are in the other world . . . but in which or what sort of other world?" (p. 269). What we do know for certain is that this world "cohabits" (MacDonald borrows the word from Thoreau) the same space as ordinary reality, the two being "interpenetrating, yet unmingling" (p. 217; cf. p. 185). As a cohabitant reality, the other world is, like Spenser's Faerie Land, analogous to our own: i.e., despite its unusual appearance, it is populated by a variety of light and dark figures who are bound together in a recognizable admixture. When Vane's father asks the Raven if this new world is "better than the old," the Raven responds, "not throughout; but . . . As for moral laws, they must everywhere be fundamentally the same" (p. 220).

Once inside the other world, the hero finds that he cannot remember his own name: "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" (p. 195). Bunyan's Christian begins his pilgrimage with the desire to know "What shall I do?"; Vane initiates his adventures with the equally motivating recognition that he "but slenderly knows himself." The quest, however, cannot begin in earnest until the hero is more thoroughly committed to the task of self-discovery. It is conventionally atypical (and so a point of interest) that Vane several times finds himself back in the real world. MacDonald may have inherited this device from E.T.A. Hoffmann's "The Golden Pot" which he read enthusiastically in his youth; in any case, Vane's preliminary flights from the other world amount to what Joseph Campbell terms "the refusal of the Call": an inability to surrender "what one takes to be one's own interests."¹³ The Raven, however, argues that "if you understand any world besides your own, you understand your own much better" (p. 206), a dictum that could well stand as the motto of all romance. In MacDonald's early romance, *Phantastes* (1858), the hero involuntarily descends into a night-world of dreams by falling asleep. Vane, after several traumas, makes a fully conscious choice to reenter the other world through the mirror-door, a choice that confirms his desire to transform himself from one who has "never done anything to justify my existence" (p. 204) to a spiritual adventurer willing to confront the potential hazards of self-knowledge.

The hero's initial challenge proves to be dire indeed. In this new world the Raven is a sexton who ministers to the sleeping dead in a vast cemetery that will remind readers of MacDonald of the land of beneficial death "at the back of the North Wind." On seeing the supine bodies in the sexton's chamber, Vane remarks that "I thought at first their sleep was death, but I soon saw that it was something deeper still—a something I did not know" (p. 213-4). He learns from the Raven that death is the ultimate paradox and that "none of those you see here are in truth quite dead yet, and some have just begun to come alive and die. Others had begun to die, that is to come alive, long before they came to us" (p. 216). Tolkien observed that "Death is the theme that most inspired MacDonald," and its importance is central in *Lilith*.¹⁴ MacDonald believed quite literally that, as Paul writes, "that which thou sowest is not quickened, except it die" (I Cor. 15:36). He seems to be glossing this passage when he writes:

. . . may it not be believed of many human beings, that, the great Husbandman having sewn them like seeds in the soil of human affairs, there they lie buried life long; and only after the up-turning of the soil by death, reach the position in which the awakening of aspiration and the consequence of growth becomes possible?¹⁵

Such growth is represented by the Raven's charges who, when they are "dead indeed, that instant they will wake and leave. . ." (p. 216). The dialectical reversal that informs the plot, then, is also present as a point of considerable thematic importance: the growth that the Raven offers Vane when he suggests that the hero take up a bier in his vault is an ultimate quickening after the death-like interlude of life, a lying down in darkness followed by what Novalis (from whom MacDonald learned much on this subject) calls the "higher revelation of life."¹⁶ But Vane, who is not prepared to experiment with the paradox of death or resign himself to the Raven's guidance, flees again. This time, however, instead of returning to the civilized constraints of the temporal world, he finds himself in a sub-human landscape teeming with the horrors of his own benighted imagination. As the Raven points out, "No one who will not sleep can ever wake" (p. 225); and so the hero, estranged from the customary ascent through death, must in consequence confront his own worst nightmares.

Vane's refusal to take his place on the regenerative couch of death marks the end of his innocence and the beginning of his descent. Now, as the Raven explains, he must "make himself at home" in the other world by "doing something" (p. 215), which in romance invariably means what Dr. Johnson called "wild adventures."¹⁷ What immediately follows has the equivocal quality of an awakening dream. When confronted with the menacing forms of the Bad Burrow, Vane wonders, "what life can there be here but the phantasmagoric—the stuff that dreams are made of? I am indeed walking in a vain show!" (p. 229). The obvious pun seems to indicate that this phantasmagoria is a self-generated nightmare projected by the unconscious. And while it has ever been the responsibility of the romance hero to encounter the uncomprehended forces of his own desire, it has also been his prerogative to do so while fully conscious.

Correspondingly, Vane, faced with nocturnal phantoms, is immediately startled into awareness: "For the first time I knew what an awful thing it was to be awake in the universe: I 'was' and could not help it" (p. 228).

The striking contrast between the graceful rest of the Raven's cemetery and the turmoil of the Bad Burrow and Evil Wood is symptomatic of another romance convention, the polarization of imagery. The hero, threatened by the dark terrors of the night, is nonetheless protected by the benevolent brightness of the moon. By day, as he rests in a dry wasteland, he is sustained by the sound of an underground stream. This latter motif of the parched land where water has "fled away underground" is clearly connected with the Old Testament imagery of the land removed from divine *caritas*, while the "aural mirage" of underground springs signals the imminence of God's presence even in this Malebolge.¹⁸ Such patterns of polarized imagery (light vs. darkness, water vs. drought) serve to "figure forth" the idealized but radically opposite claims of divine and demonic order. Faced with such contradictory claims on his allegiance, Vane will undergo an oscillation between altruism, on the one hand, and the all-too-human attraction to the nightmare world of uninhibited desire on the other.

In romance, polarization customarily extends to character, a tendency exhibited here in the episode of the "Friends and Foes." The latter is a race of primitive giants, "fungoid people with just enough mind to give them motion and the expressions of anger and greed" (p. 238), while the former is a colony of "Little Ones" who are forever childlike, precocious and loving. It is the special mark of MacDonald's concept of polarity, however, that the two groups are closely related. Lona, the leader of the children, tells Vane that "If a Little One doesn't care, he grows greedy, and then lazy, and then big, then stupid, and then bad" (p. 244). But this devolutionary process is only the retrograde swing of an overall pattern of progressive growth. The fungoid giants, like the spectral dancers and the "grotesque" couple (see Chs. XVI-XVII), have reversed the natural order of growth but may again reassert their evolutionary capabilities. The Little Ones, on the other hand, have been locked into a position of stasis, unable to encounter the risks and suffering inherent in growth and adulthood. This hiatus is analogous to Vane's own arrested development since his refusal to sleep and "die" and consequently

grow. The hero's resolution to continue his adventures in hope of "coming upon some elucidation of the fortunes and destiny of these bewitching little creatures" (p. 247) is both an acknowledgment of the importance of growth and a significant advance by a man who had previously "loved my Arab mare and my books more, I fear, than live man or woman" (p. 235). His resolution also confers upon the narrative the conventional structure of the heroic quest.

But as we might expect from this kind of dialectical plot, reversal follows resolution. Finding the lifeless form of *Lilith* along his path, Vane immediately forgets his quest in the Little Ones' behalf and becomes obsessed with tending his new charge. It has been some time since he has had adult, human contact, and he rationalizes that "A man to be perfect—complete that is, in having reached a spiritual condition of persistent and universal growth . . . must have the education of a world of fellow men" (p. 280). The theme of evolutionary growth is again sounded but in a notably ironic context. This episode closely parallels a similar incident in *Phantastes* in which the hero enters a cave described as "the unseen hall" of the artist's brain (p. 44) and, like Pygmalion, gives birth to a vision of feminine perfection. But for the older MacDonald, the burden of the hero is darker and more complex, and the cave in which Vane tends *Lilith* is instead a realm of intense ego-centrism where "first I knew what solitude meant" (p. 279). Like Blake's Mundane Shell where "man has closed himself up," Vane's cave is the locus of a private obsession where he brings to life "a nameless something . . . wrought/ By him out of himself" (p. 320). The fact that this "something" is *Lilith* is an emphatic statement of man's potential for corruption by a *romanceur* who is anything but an escapist. Serious romance, it might be said, is dedicated not to the encounter and triumph of the hero over any dragon, but more exactly to the confrontation with that very demon which represents the most serious threat to the growth of the hero. Milton's Satan claims that "Not to know mee argues yourself unknow'n"; Vane's adventures similarly argue that in order for the hero to fully understand himself he must first succumb to *Lilith*'s lethal beauty. Only after he recognizes her malignity and his own ignorance and weakness in the face of her wiles can he escape the deadly cave of "individuality, secured by personal consciousness" (p. 280) and reach his true spiritual condition of

"persistent and universal growth."

As the force opposing that growth, MacDonald's Lilith (like Goethe's Mephistopheles) is at once an individual demon called into being by this hero and a universal force whose origins transcend this particular incarnation. In Jewish demonology, Lilith is an arch-destroyer whose precise function is to threaten women in labor and murder their off-spring. In Midrashic literature, she is identified with Adam's first wife.¹⁹ She retains both roles in MacDonald, who expands on the latter by adding that she left Adam because of her desire for power, and having "ensnared the heart of the great Shadow" (whom we may for the moment identify with Satan and Death), she has become "the queen of Hell" (p. 322). The success of her despotism is made clear when we learn that it was she who transformed "the land of waters" into a "country as dry and dusty as her own heart" (p. 254). However, in accordance with Hebrew lore, the powers of MacDonald's villainess are bounded since "she consumes and slays but is powerless to destroy as to create" [sic] (p. 323). This proviso is of major significance in a Christian cosmology where the slain will be redeemed by the Last Judgment, and the conflict between the dark female and the higher authority of the divine Father will ultimately be resolved in favor of the latter.

But if Lilith is a dark and threatening power, she is also, like Circe, or Lorelei, or La Belle Dame Sans Merci, a seductress. Vane's response to her is appropriately ambivalent: how, he wonders, can "such beauty as I saw, and such wickedness as I suspected, exist in the same person?" (p. 304). The customary answer, of course, is that the golden casket does not necessarily contain Portia's portrait, that material beauty is often illusory and belies any fundamental relation with spiritual goodness. Yet such an answer is not easy to maintain in the face of an anima-like being who can clothe herself "in the likeness true/Of that idea where [the hero's] soul doth cleave," and who all other women "outran,/Outsoured, outsank, outreigned" (p. 319). Even after Vane has been seduced and cast aside by this vampire-lover, he still approaches her quivering "with conflicting consciousness . . . simultaneously attracted and repelled" (p. 303). This ambivalent struggle is the central *agon* of the hero's adventures, a struggle in which his own attitudes have been polarized: "I felt that, if I did not loathe her, I should love her" (p. 307).

The hero's uncertain yet persistent attraction to Lilith is perhaps more understandable if we recognize in her the archetype of the "terrible mother." Erich Neumann writes that this deity customarily presents herself as either "the blood-stained goddess of death, plague, famine, flood and the force of instinct, or as the sweetness that leads to destruction." The lion, adds Neumann, is the natural symbol of "the lacerating character" of the goddess since it combines great beauty with bestial violence.²⁰ Correspondingly, MacDonald's villainess appears both as despot, infanticide and vampire and as a vixen who, with "innocent smile," half-convinces the hero that "To me she may be true" (p. 307). She is not only attended by a spotted "leopardess," she actually undergoes lycanthropic transformation into the beast itself. Neumann goes on to define the goddess's power as "an expression of [the] archetypal dominion of nature and the unconscious over life and likewise over the undeveloped childlike, or youthfully helpless, ego consciousness."²¹ We have already noted Lilith's power to withhold water from her domain, a power over nature that has its counterpart in her suppression of motherhood and the damming up of the Little Ones' tears. For the children, the result is that even though they are outside Lilith's direct control her enmity effectively truncates their ability to grow. For Vane, the situation is similar but more subtle.

Deprived in childhood of parental care and separated by solipsism from human affection, the hero has—in bringing life to Lilith—awakened in himself long suppressed emotional and erotic impulses. Yet having once aroused these feelings and projected them onto Lilith, he is held in thrall because, in his "youthful helplessness," such impulses lie beyond his conscious control. Lilith is irresistible precisely because she represents the realm of unconscious desire from which we never fully escape. The hero (or in Freud's famous phrase, "His Majesty the Ego") continually struggles to free himself of regressive impulses but is nonetheless attracted by a kind of "psychic gravitation" into the dark world of unfulfilled and unacceptable desires.²² In his visit to "the black ellipsoid" of Lilith's inner chamber, Vane is first lulled into semi-consciousness by a charmed bath and a soporific drink, after which he descends (in a tour de force of oniric imagery) into a "walgurgisnacht" of sexual assault and "hideous burrowing phantasms" (p. 309). Only when he re-emerges from these

hallucinations does the hero realize that he has been "in the brain of the princess" (p. 313), in the grip, that is, of the unconscious.

As might be expected in romance, the demonic influence of the "terrible mother" is counterpointed by, in this case, a trio of benign maternal figures. Throughout Vane's journey he is guided by Mara, whose protective moonlight shelters him from the dark terrors of Lilith's domain and who is a kind of Magdalene figure who attends the persecuted and waits for the joy that "cometh in the morning" (see p. 409). She is also known as the "cat woman," for she possesses, or is herself, another leopardess, this one pure white. The two leopards—one white, one spotted; one protective, the other vicious—are antithetical rivals who fiercely contend for the lives of the children of Bulika (Lilith's city). Mara's protective and maternal attributes are given larger mythological scope in the figure of the Raven's wife. The Raven, we learn, is in fact Adam, the primal father and what MacDonald calls "the old and new man" (p. 323). His wife, then, is Eve, "the mother of us all, the lady of the New Jerusalem" (p. 323). In her role as the mistress of the sexton's cemetery, Eve is a maternal figure of the highest order, one who not only gave original form to mankind but who labors still to deliver her children into paradise reborn. To this pattern of loving maternity, we must also add Lona, the spiritual mother of the Little Ones, and, as it turns out, the only child that Lilith bore Adam. Seen as a group, this trio of benign females is composed not so much of individual characters as variations or elements of a "generalized female principle" that transcends individual expression.²³ They are the aggregate form of Lilith's antitheses: the loving female as immortal deity (Eve), as tender mother (Mara), and as virginal lover (for the hero does indeed fall in love with Lona).

Vane's growth is directly dependent on his ability to free himself from his periodic submission to Lilith and align himself with the regenerative powers of the good mothers. But this effort is frustrated by both ignorance and disobedience. After the hero has been duped by Lilith into placing the Little Ones in jeopardy, the Raven explains to him that only by recognizing his present ignorance can he make his "first tottering step" towards eventual understanding (p. 327; cf. pp. 203, 315). More specifically, the Raven suggests that Vane now take up his couch in Eve's chamber in order to prepare himself to act wisely in the

future. Instead, the hero impetuously rushes off to rejoin the Little Ones and hatch a "vainglorious" plan to conquer Bulika with an army of the children. Such a campaign is not simply a travesty of heroic action, perverting instead of elevating the natures of the children, it is also an act of direct disobedience which amounts to a repetition of Adam's original failure to obey a divine command. The "mortal fruit of Man's Disobedience" in this case is indeed "death and woe," for though the army does take Bulika, Lilith kills Lona. The hero's grief and shame over her death and his responsibility for it mark the nadir of his adventures and the inescapable recognition of his own ignorance. It is at this point of absolute emptiness, when all illusions of being able "to do something" on his own have been stripped away, that he begins his funereal ascent towards a new identity. Like its typological original in the stories of Adam, Israel and the Gospels, the fall of the hero's limited self is the necessary preparation for the final awakening of the "new man."

What follows the Battle of Bulika is MacDonald's rendering of the mystical cycle of ascent, his "Paradiso" or "Ninth Night of the Zoas." As such, these concluding episodes are filled with a profusion of symbolic material and narrative turns that are beyond the scope of the present inquiry. What I will attempt here is to abstract the primary patterns of *Lilith's* culminating ascent toward apocalypse, patterns based on the Christological schema of suffering, death, resurrection and ascent. But at the same time it is necessary to acknowledge that any abstract narrative pattern is generated from a vortex of symbols, images and ecstatic descriptions that frustrates any simple reduction to discursive closure. In his brief essay on the "Fantastic Imagination," MacDonald himself makes this point when he argues that the true fairy tale is more like a sonata than an allegory (though "there may be allegory in it"): since so many diverse and unforeseen relations are "involved in every figure . . . hinted in every symbol," the work itself must "mean many things; the truer its art the more it will mean."²⁴

It is helpful to subdivide further the welter of action that culminates *Lilith* (Chs. XXXVIII-XLVII) into three phases, loosely corresponding to purgation, heroic action and final revelation. In the first of these "acts," it is Lilith who must recognize her evil and repent. After the battle and her murder of Lona, Lilith is captured and brought to Mara, who as the

tender mother is the appropriate agent of her purgation. Mara begins the process by asking Lilith if she will be her "real self" (p. 371). We know that for MacDonald the isolated individual self is a severely limited concept: "our consciousness," he writes, "is infinitely less than we."²⁵ Lilith is totally bounded by her solipsistic "hell of self-consciousness," and though she tenaciously maintains her right "to do as my Self pleases—as my self desires," Mara insists that this independence is not only a delusion but also the result of possession. Lilith acts, says Mara, "as the Shadow, overshadowing your Self inclines you" (p. 371). MacDonald introduced the figure of the Shadow in *Phantastes* as a kind of dark image of the self, a counterfeit being who represents the unacknowledged and incompatible tendencies of one's own character. But in *Lilith*, the Shadow has greater mythological import: it is he who made Lilith the queen of hell, and it is only he who has the power to kill. He is, in sum, the ultimate incarnation of evil unalloyed, the negative polarity; and yet, in MacDonald's theology of paradox in which death is but the "radiant garment of Life" (p. 408), the "great Shadow," for all his temporal power, is in the end only the absence of divine light, the oxymoronic "presence of Nothing" (p. 375). But such an absence is in itself corrupting, and the poison that Lilith has inherited from her liaison with the Shadow is manifest in her hideous dark spot of contamination.

"Self," writes MacDonald, "is as full of worms as it can hold, and is the damnest fiend a man can have."²⁶ This message is given narrative form when, following Mara's injunction to "see your own self," a horrible, incandescent worm appears and crawls inside of Lilith's wound, burning a path "through the joints and marrow to the thoughts and intents of the heart" (p. 373). In this way the debased obsessions of Lilith's selfhood are made clear to her in a purgatorial fire. At the conclusion of this torturous episode, Lilith, defeated and contrite, begins to weep, an act that signals a loosening of repressed goodness, and this in turn is followed by an awakening of the underground waters, i.e. the imminent divinity within the wasteland of her own being. But before any ultimate cleansing, Lilith must surrender her reflexive grasp on the "inheritance of Nothingness" (her insistence on "self-creation" rather than obedience) that she keeps within her clenched fist. The first step in Lilith's purgation had been guided by Mara's maternal compassion; the second and final

phase is a swift act of divine judgment that Lilith herself requests by asking Adam to sever the diseased hand with a sword given him by an angel of Paradise. The decision to request judgment is an act of volition that both subordinates her own pain and self-interest and reflects her obedience to the demands of "goodness." As soon as her grip on the illusion of selfhood is relinquished, she is asleep on the couch of awakening death. This apocalyptic purgation of evil serves as a model for the hero, replete with his own sins of disobedience, by providing him with the assurance of divine forgiveness and thus the resolution to move toward his own salvation.

Earlier in the romance, the Raven had told Vane that "Annihilation itself is no death to evil. Only good where evil was, is evil dead" [sic] (p. 328). Lilith's contrition, therefore, must be followed by a more positive act of amelioration, a demonstration of repentance and obedience. Significantly, the setting for this second act shifts from Lilith to Vane. Whereas the exorcism of Lilith's sin plays out the great moral battle of light against darkness on a macrocosmic scale, the process of regeneration is centered on the individual. The personalization of such an important moment follows a pattern established in the New Testament, where, as M.H. Abrams points out, there is a shift in the "theatre of events from the outer earth and heaven to the spirit of the single believer . . ." ²⁷ As he watches Lilith's trials, the hero undergoes a vicarious struggle of his own with "the horrible Nothingness" of life consumed by selfhood (pp. 370, 375). Directly following her submission and sleep, Vane makes his own confession, asking Adam's pardon for "both my cowardice and self-confidence": "I am sick of myself and would fain sleep the sleep" (p. 391). But while God may annihilate evil with the swift sword of judgment, the burden of activating goodness remains an individual ordeal; the hero must, in other words, fulfill his destiny through heroic action rather than passive contrition. Vane's penance involves the transportation of Lilith's severed hand across the still-menacing landscape of the Bad Burrow; and in the face of temptation and threat, he finally displays a heroic resolve that results from his strict adherence to Adam's commands. As soon as his mission is complete, the vanished waters begin to flow and ultimately submerge the "monster horde" of the Evil Wood. The source of MacDonald's imagery here is the millennial prophecy of Isaiah who foresees the

outbreak of "streams in the desert" that inundate "the habitation of dragons" (Isa. 35:7-8). Similarly, this episode is one of climactic renewal in which the demons of selfhood are submerged and the weary spirit of the hero is renovated by the liberation of the divine current.

Having finally lived up to his role as heroic adventurer by rejecting the twin specters of selfhood and disobedience, Vane is prepared to "sleep the sleep" that initiates his epiphany. Once asleep on the couch of death, he is exposed to "the dreams that come," an obvious reference to Hamlet. But whereas Hamlet fears ghostly nightmares, Vane's dreams prepare the way for his resurrection into a higher evolutionary identity. I have already indicated that the pattern of this last cycle corresponds basically to the Christological passion of suffering and death followed by rebirth and ascent. We are here at the mid-point in the progress, the awakening within the dream of death. Evelyn Underhill describes this point on the "mystic way" as the awakening of the individual to transcendental consciousness, "from a smaller, limited world of existence into a larger world of being." In Vane's case, he awakens to dreams of eternity: "I grew continuously less conscious of myself, continuously more conscious of bliss . . . I was in a land of thought—farther in and higher up than the seven dimensions . . . in the heart of God" (p. 401). But Underhill also points out that as the mystic proceeds to explore the transcendental state, his movement is marked by "a series of strongly marked oscillations between 'states of pleasure' and 'states of pain.'"²⁸ These oscillations correspond to the dialectical reversals we have noted throughout Vane's progress, though at this point the rhythm of the pattern accelerates. Just as Vane begins to "dream cycles" and experience "the solemn, aeonian march of a second, pregnant with eternity," he is thrown back into a state of guilt in which he must confront "all the earthly wrongs I had ever done . . ." (p. 401). This and subsequent reversals amount to the hero's "noche oscura de la alma."

This oscillatory phase ends when the hero wakes in his own garret in the real world. The next four days he spends endeavoring to return through "the mystic door" (p. 406) to the Raven's cemetery, and his tenacity in this pursuit clearly demonstrates the transfer of his allegiance from the "dreary world" of private history and individual self-consciousness to the

"eternal presence" of the other world. His desire to resume his place on the couch of death also implies a recognition that, as MacDonald writes, death is but "the first pulse of the new strength shaking itself free from the old moldy remnants of earth garments, that it may begin in freedom the new life that grows out of the old."²⁹ This is the culmination of Vane's struggle for a fuller sense of identity and a resolution of the romance's explicitly theological quest for man's spiritual nature. The commitment shown by the hero here, then, is the final prerequisite for his ascent toward vision.

On the fourth night of his isolation, the hero wakes again in the house of death; the number of transitions back and forth (five in all) have blurred the distinction between waking and dreaming so that the two states seem fused. Since Vane will return to his earthly home at the close of the romance, we may assume that this awakening is to a state of imaginative vision. As Novalis remarks, "Naught but dreams might lead to the most sacred place."³⁰ In spite of the fact, then, that this final adventure is entitled "The Waking," a title that literally refers to the hero's resurrection from the couch of death, the experience he undergoes is at the same time a prophetic dream. Vane opens his eyes to behold Lona and is startled by the "light of her body now ten-fold awake in the power of the resurrection . . ." (p. 407). The Raven and his wife, now Adam and Eve, are also transformed into "angels of the resurrection" (p. 409). The realm in which he has awakened is clearly "farther in and higher up" than he has been before. It is in fact a point of anagogic vision which comprehends both the individual and mythological events that have preceded it. "The microcosm and macrocosm," says Vane, "were at length atoned, at length in harmony" (p. 412). The "Journey Home" of Ch. XLV is both an individual experience and a premonition of a Last Judgment; Vane, Lona and the Little Ones are the world family climbing toward the New Jerusalem. As they draw near, Vane senses that "all I wanted to know and know not, must be on its way to me!" (p. 418). But just as he begins his final ascent, a hand draws him aside "to a little door with a golden lock" and pushes him 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" (p. 419).

Vane's Pisgah vision of paradise is his last contact with the

other world; the story ends with the hero in the "pensive mood" of one who continues to contemplate a "higher world than that of ordinary experience."³¹ MacDonald is said to have kept a copy of Blake's frontispiece to the illustrations of Blair's "The Grave" on his library wall, and Blake's own dedication to that poem helps to clarify the abrupt return that closes *Lilith*:

The Door of Death is made of Gold,
That mortal eyes cannot behold;
And when the mortal eyes are closed
And cold and pale the limbs reposed,
The soul awakes, and wond'ring sees
In her mild hand the Golden Keys.

Since Vane is still alive, he cannot be handed the golden keys to empyrean. His return, I note in closing, is conventional, the traditional completion of the "circuitous journey" of quest romance.³² Having ventured forth into a world of supernatural wonder, having encountered fabulous events and resisted the temptations of demonic forces, the hero returns home to a life about which there is not much to say. There remain, however, the special boons that have always been granted the heroes of romance: a new, revitalized identity and the "rare advantage of knowing two worlds."

Iowa State University

NOTES

¹C.S. Lewis in the "Introduction" to George MacDonald, *Phantastes and Lilith* (Grand Rapids, 1964), p. 9; and W.H. Auden in his "Introduction" to *The Visionary Novels of George MacDonald*, ed. Anne Freemantle (New York, 1954), pp. v-vi. Wells's admiration for *Lilith* is cited in Robert Lee Wolff, *The Golden Key: A Study of the Fiction of George MacDonald* (New Haven, 1961), pp. 338-9; and Chesterton acknowledges his debt in his "Introduction" to Dr. Greville MacDonald's *George MacDonald and His Wife* (London, 1924), pp. 9-15 (hereafter this work noted as *GMW*). For Eliot, see Kathryn Walls, "George

MacDonald's *Lilith* and the Later Poetry of T.S. Eliot," *ELN*, 16 (1978), pp. 47-51; and for Tolkien, see Frank Bergman, "The Roots of Tolkien's Tree: The Influence of George MacDonald and German Romanticism upon Tolkien's Essay 'On Fairy Stories,'" *Mosaic*, 10 (1975), pp. 5-15. Steven Prickett in *Victorian Fantasy* (Bloomington, 1979), p. 10; for a general discussion of MacDonald, see pp. 173-94.

²Wolff's chapter on *Lilith* in *The Golden Key* (see *n.* 1) is the most extensive analysis to date. There are, however, definite limitations to Wolff's Freudian perspective, and his general antagonism to *Lilith* causes him to misread the work as a misanthropic dirge. Richard H. Reis's *George MacDonald* (New York, 1972) is a valuable outline of MacDonald's thought and work; however, the remarks on *Lilith* are unfortunately brief: see pp. 94-102. For general remarks on MacDonald's romances by writers interested in the non-realist fictional tradition, see Louis MacNiece, *Varieties of Parable* (Cambridge, 1965), pp. 94-101; Eric Rabkin, *The Fantastic Imagination* (Princeton, 1976), pp. 98-116; Colin Manlove, *Modern Fantasy* (Cambridge, 1975), pp. 55-98; see also Manlove's more recent article, "The Circle of Imagination: George MacDonald's *Phantastes* and *Lilith*," *SSL*, 17 (1982), pp. 55-80. Finally, of related interest is Roderick F. McGillis's "George MacDonald—the *Lilith* Manuscripts," *SLJ*, 14, no. 2 (1977), pp. 40-57.

³Anon., *TLS* (29 May 1924), p. 330.

⁴George MacDonald, *Phantastes and Lilith*, p. 227. All subsequent references to *Lilith* are to the 1964 edition (see *n.* 1) and will cite page no. in text.

⁵The term is from Northrop Frye's *The Secular Scripture* (Cambridge, Mass., 1976), pp. 127-157. Like all students of romance, I am much indebted to Professor Frye.

⁶Quote from M.H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism* (New York, 1971), p. 193.

⁷Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Princeton, 1949), p. 58.

⁸C.S. Lewis was the first to point out that this figure haunted MacDonald's imagination; see Lewis' *George MacDonald: An Anthology* (New York, 1947), p. xxiv. Other rich sources of this image in MacDonald's work included his novels *Malcolm* and *The Portent*, and his classic children's tale "The Princess and Curdie."

⁹Greville MacDonald, *GMW*, p. 489; cf. p. 530.

¹⁰MacDonald, *The Hope of the Gospels*; cited in Manlove, *Modern Fantasy*, p. 60.

¹¹In order of appearance: George MacDonald, "The Imagination: Its Function and Its Culture," *A Dish of Orts* (London, n.d.), p. 4; MacDonald, *Orts*, p. 25; and George MacDonald, *At the Back of the North Wind* (New York, 1966), p. 196.

¹²The theme of the difficulty of language in describing the other world experience is a persistent one in *Lilith*; see pp. 194, 227, 245, 316, 318, 371, and 418. See also Frye, p. 110.

¹³The quotations are from Campbell, pp. 59-60. For MacDonald's reading of Hoffmann, see Greville MacDonald, pp. 297-8.

¹⁴J.R.R. Tolkien, "On Fairy Stories," *The Tolkien Reader* (New York, 1968), p. 68; see also Greville MacDonald, p. 554.

¹⁵George MacDonald in *Adele Cathcart*; cited in Reis, p. 36.

¹⁶Novalis, *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, trans. Palmer Hilty (New York, 1964), p. 156.

¹⁷Dr. Johnson's full definition of romance is "a tale of wild adventures in love and chivalry."

¹⁸See Ps. 63:1 and Isa. 1:30; for God's voice as "the sound of rushing waters," see Ezek. 43:2, Rev. 1:15 and 19:6.

¹⁹*Encyclopedia Judaica* (Jerusalem, 1971), XI, Cols. 245-49;

see also Gustav Davidson on Lilith in *The Zohar; The Dictionary of Angels* (New York, 1967), pp. 174-5.

²⁰See Erich Neumann, *The Origins and History of Consciousness*, trans. R.F.C. Hull (New York, 1954), pp. 39-101; and Neumann, *The Great Mother*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York, 1955), pp. 3-38, and 147-76; quotes from *Origins*, pp. 40 and 56, resp.

²¹Neumann, *The Great Mother*, p. 30.

²²For "psychic gravitation," see Neumann, *The Great Mother*, pp. 26 ff.

²³The quote is from Joseph Sigman's fine reading of *Phantastes* in which the same female gestalt appears; see Sigman, "Death's Ecstasies: Transformations and Rebirth in George MacDonald's *Phantastes*," *English Studies in Canada*, 2 (1976), p. 208.

²⁴MacDonald, "The Fantastic Imagination," in *Orts*, pp. 317-21.

²⁵Cited in Manlove, *Modern Fantasy*, p. 60. It should be remembered that for MacDonald the realm beyond consciousness is a divine one; see par. containing n. 11 in text.

²⁶George MacDonald, *Donal Grant*, ch. XXXVII; cited in *The World of George MacDonald*, ed. Rolland Hein (Wheaton, IL, 1978), p. 101.

²⁷Abrams, p. 47.

²⁸For a full description of the "mystic way," see Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism*, 12th ed. (New York, n.d.), pp. 167ff. The first quote is from E.T. Starbuck, cited in Underhill, p. 177. I am indebted to Richard Reis for suggesting the applicability of Underhill's system to MacDonald's works; see Reis, pp. 38-40, and 127.

²⁹George MacDonald in *David Elginbrod*, cited in Greville

MacDonald, p. 555.

³⁰Novalis, "The Novices of Sais," *The German Classics*, ed. Kuno Francke (Albany, 1913-14), VI, 187.

³¹Frye, p. 150.

³²The quoted term is from Abrams; see Abrams' discussion, pp. 141-324, and esp. pp. 167 and 193-94.