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Crystal City: Sodom – Bulika – Jerusalem

Karl Kegler

According to a Talmudic tradition, Lilith's destructive powers are concentrated in her hair.¹ It is the braid of hair which indicates her presence in Anselm Kiefer's painting *Lilith*.² Kiefer's painting depicts a city: a disordered multitude of modern multi-storeyed buildings that stretch out to the horizon in colours of mud and grey. The scene is overlain by a grey, cloud-like structure which, upon close examination, looks dry and dirty like a veil of dust. The name "Lilith" is written in clumsy writing into it. Where is Lilith? Has she disappeared and is to be recognised only by her devastating effects, or is the city the body for the tangled hair?—A depressing, unfriendly city which, it seems, already bears the marks of decomposition and ruin: stepping close to the picture it looks like a rugged dry landscape.

City and desert are images MacDonald likewise connects with the character of Lilith. For him she is the ruler over the city of Bulika, whose inhabitants regard themselves as "more ancient and noble than any other nation" (125).³ Lilith has ruled over them "for thousands of years" (125). "She is older than the world, and came to it from yours with a terrible history, which is not over yet" (76), Mara explains to Vane. The people of Bulika are rich from inherited opulence, but produce nothing of any worth themselves. It is a city of consumption. The people's wealth comes from their ancestors and they never spend it. What money they need they obtain from the sale of precious stones found under their houses, thus undermining them (124). This is no productive creation, but the exploitation of a benison which a creation other than their own has provided. Their excavations recall the pits and mines beneath Gwyntystorm in *The Princess and Curdie*, where exhaustive exploitation of the gold under the ground leads finally to the collapse of the city. Bulika, however, appears already as a dead city when Vane enters it for the first time:

Passing through, I looked down a long ancient street. It was utterly silent, and with scarce an indication in it of life present. Had I come upon a dead city? (120-21)

This death spreads into the periphery with the waste that the inhabitants heap up in front of the city walls. The gates of Bulika are thrown off their hinges **[end of page 36]** and can be neither shut nor opened properly. The

mighty walls display the marks of ruin.

In many aspects Bulika is a mirror of Lilith herself. Lilith keeps her power not by an internal strength but by the blood of any child she can lay hold of (124), and she drinks it in the shape of a leopardess. According to a well-known dictum of MacDonald's, children are the greatest of all gifts of God.⁴ Lilith gets her power by incorporating the gifts of a creation not her own, hating everything which escapes her grasp. But like Bulika she is shrivelled and hollow within. When Vane sees her for the first time as more than a wraith she is dead and dry as a mummy, her hair alone displays a vestige of her former beauty. And it is significant that Vane finds her in this condition in the forest, where the dead have bodies which reflect their state of mind. She regains her life only by sucking the blood of her helper. As Bulika soils the land outside its walls with its waste, so Lilith has wasted the land over which her grasp extends by stealing one half of all the waters, closing them up in her hand. But in doing this she has crippled herself, since greed and pride prevent her ever opening the hand again. She is a princess of deserts: the barren city of Bulika and a land bereft of water.

Just as Lilith's character is illustrated by the city she rules over, MacDonald employs opposite metaphorical images to depict Mara and Lona as the exponents of the counteracting forces. While Lilith can prevent her decay only by exploiting a creation not her own, Lona is characterized by an eternal girlishness, or, better, by the inability to grow older. Her people, the "little ones," are naturally clever and brave, whereas Lilith's subjects are cowardly and cunning. Lilith resides in a heavily fortified palace, but Lona and her little ones dwell in the open air; first under their fruit trees, then in nests in the branches of larger trees which, as living architecture, are the greatest possible contrast to the dead city of Bulika. Their initial happy, homeless state allows for the possibility of development, towards lodgings which are themselves alive. In Bulika, by contrast, the only change possible is gradual decay.

Mara is in many respects closer to Lilith than to Lona. Like Lilith she is a mature woman. Both of them use frightening panthers. The difference between them is most obvious in their dwellings. Lilith's palace is a sign of her claim to power, built and fortified for all the ages of her reign. Mara's cottage is a lodging for transition. When Vane arrives there both doors are wide open (78), and the shelter that she provides is for one night only (81). Yet the house is well built and has a foundation of rock. **[37]**

Mara mentions two biblical characters with whom she could be

compared, although she is neither of them: Lot's wife grieving for Sodom and Rachel weeping for her children (79). Instinctively, one wishes to add to these the mourning women whom Jesus meets on his way to crucifixion. If the words he speaks to these women are examined, an interesting indication is given of the situation in *Lilith*:

do not weep for me; no, weep for yourselves and your children
. . . . For if these things are done when the wood is green, what
will happen when it is dry? (Luke 23.27-31)

The land whose waters are stolen corresponds to the dry tree in the word of Christ. In "the evil wood," visited earlier by Vane, the trees have blossoms like skulls, and in an evening breeze the leaves group themselves into hideous images of astonishing distinctness. At night, the trees transform into a multitude of skeletons and spectres engaged in endless conflict. The spectre of Lilith incites them in their senseless murder: "Ye are men: slay one another!" When morning breaks the dead have gone, just here and there a withered-branch remains—dry wood (52-55). Taking the image of the dry wood in its eschatological sense, it illustrates the final stage of a world sunk into evil—a condition, however, which also contains the seeds of renewal, since Mara points to a time when this state will pass away and Lona and the children, after having gone through great troubles, will fill the land (77). This also provides an explanation for the childishness of Lona and the Little Ones and their inability to grow. The evil, barren state of the world bears the seed of its restoration as "The Land of Waters," but not yet the unfolding of this seed. As long as Lilith is not overcome the children cannot develop. Or, expressed better: until the good finds itself the reign of Lilith will continue. Mara has the role of a mediator who prepares a coming restoration. She rescues the innocent children of Bulika from the grasp of Lilith, thus saving the seed for a later development. Opposite to this, her principal characteristic is her grief. Like Rachel and Lot's wife, Mara is characterized as mourning. But she does not only grieve for herself and her children but also for Sodom, which is the centre of evil.

If Bulika is compared with the picture of Sodom given in the kabbalistic tradition, some remarkable parallels appear. According to the *Pirke Rabbi Eliezer* (a ninth century text), the wealth of Sodom had its origin in gold, pearls and jewels that were found directly beneath the ground:

But great wealth leads a man into error. A man of Sedom never gave as much as a crumb of bread to a stranger . . . Sedom

[38] was protected against attacks, but to scare away visitors

its inhabitants made a law that anyone who gave a stranger anything to eat should be burned alive. (208-09)⁵

The woman of Bulika whom Vane meets on the streets at night, when he asks her if there is not any “place in the city for the taking in of strangers,” tells him that:

“Such a place would be pulled down and its owner burned.

How is purity to be preserved except by keeping low people at a proper distance? Dignity is such a delicate thing!” (125)⁶

Despite this pride and cruelty, Lot’s wife weeps for Sodom and Mara weeps for Bulika. Mara’s duty is not to revenge but to mourn, to resist and to forgive. Close at hand here is the thought that Mara, by this characterization, may represent the church in a world dominated by powers hostile to life. Not an *ecclesia triumphans* but an *ecclesia plorans*. Mara’s house may be built upon rock, but it is a provisional structure. Through her activity and her mediation, history ceases to be ruled by Lilith and comes under the sway of Lona. If this is understood as a temporal and telological process, Lilith, Mara and Lona correspond to the mediaeval concept of the triad of ages: *ante legem*, *sub lege*, *sub gratia* (although for Lilith *contra legem* would probably be preferable to *sub lege*). Vane experiences in Lilith, Mara and Lona symbolic embodiments of stages in the teleological process which leads to the restoration of the disordered creation.

In the tradition of the Old Testament and the Kaballa, Sodom is obliterated from the face of the earth by the wrath of God. In MacDonald’s treatment of these themes, Bulika does not suffer such a fate. Even the conquest of the city by Vane, in a particularly militaristic way with an army of children, is totally useless. The one bitter result is the “killing” of Lona and one or two children. Possession of the city with its depraved inhabitants is of no value. Vane’s hope to win mothers for the parentless children cannot be realized because the dull hatred of the people of Bulika against everything strange is far stronger than any parental feelings that might be stirred by the sight of the children. The plan to occupy Bulika by military power was devised by a woman of Bulika who had fled from Lilith and who could conceive her return, together with the realization of her selfish interests, only in terms of forceful usurpation (175-76). Lilith is already defeated when she sees the children approach the city. In her mirror she sees her white form covered by a spreading darkness, she loses her power and her ability to make decisions (19-92). Seeking to strengthen herself with the sight of her [39] beauty, she has seen her real (deformed) image instead. She cannot yet

accept this, but it stands as an instant of true self-knowledge, at the end of her reign.

The Christian tradition represents death and resurrection in the image of the Last Judgement: Christ on his throne as the ruler of the world pronounces his sentence. On his right the blessed are guided into paradise, on his left hell waits for the condemned. A painting by Hans Memling created between 1467 and 1471⁷ follows that scheme. Disregarding the flames and devils, the most distinctive mark of hell is the lack of vegetation, while to the left of the picture increasingly more grass grows, and on the paradise wing of the painting higher plants, including a red blossoming lily, are to be seen. The background of the central panel, in the front of which the turn of earthly history takes place, is a monotonous grassy plain bounded in the far distance by mountains. (This seems to bear some kind of associative similarity to the heather-clad landscapes in *Lilith*).

A much more recent painting, *In a Garden*, by Martha Mayer Erlebacher (1976),⁸ repeats this characterization of hell through landscape: a barren setting with three women. Beyond them is a dead dry tree, in the foreground are a few insignificant plants, all else is rock. The nakedness of the landscape is intensified by the nakedness of the women's bodies, their vulnerability stressed by the barren rocky setting. The attitudes of the bodies increase the impression of their exposedness: in vain will they look for refuge in these surroundings. Given that the title suggests rather a garden of paradise than a rocky desert, the impression is conveyed of a cruelly emptied universe, validating the connection with Memling's painting. The human body needs to be interpreted in meaningful integration with nature. The theme of this painting is the emptiness which supervenes when this requirement is unfulfilled.

Applying this to *Lilith*, we find her sphere of domination to be a self-created hell. The bad burrow, the evil forest, the dry and rocky landscape bereft of the flow of water, and the dark city of Bulika, hostile to strangers, are the objects, but also the reflections, of Lilith's will to power. In the black ellipsoidal hall in the palace of Bulika, Vane encounters these recurring images again, and as he emerges he realizes that he has been in the brain of Lilith (142-43). Upon initially setting out across the waste land, Vane realized for the first time "what an awful thing it was to be awake in the universe" (48). He recognised what Nietzsche describes as the horror of emptiness, within and without: "Die Wüste wächst. Weh dem der Wüsten birgt."⁹ How much greater the torment must be for Lilith, who, in the visions Vane watches

in [40] the ellipsoidal hall of the palace, experiences her own failure. The patterns of her fantasy make the thought of falling asleep in Adam's cemetery a real horror:

“we, that is such as I—we are but few—live to live on. Old age is to you a horror; to me it is a dear desire: the older we grow, the nearer we are to our perfection.” (134)¹⁰

But these proud words are self-deceit, and it is her torment to know this and thus to know her guilt. The elliptical floor of the hall has two foci, a symbol of Lilith's claim to stand independently and on equal terms with her creator. But only at one of these foci is there light filling the darkness, indicating that Lilith, in respect of one half, has already turned to shadow (131). When she sees this she must abandon her claims and has lost her power.

Lilith and her empire are already dead, so their destruction or occupation make no sense. It is useless to annihilate Bulika as Sodom was annihilated, since it is already a dead city. John Ruskin, a close friend of MacDonald's, wrote in the preface to his *Deucalion* (1883) an exegesis of 2 Esdras 5.5:

that in the time spoken of by the prophet, which, if not our own, is one exactly corresponding to it, the deadness of men to all noble things shall be so great, that the sap of trees shall be more truly blood, in God's sight, than their hearts' blood; and the silence of men, in praise of all noble things, so great, that the stones shall cry out in God's hearing, instead of their tongues. (99)

In the symbolic end of time that MacDonald describes in *Lilith*, this state seems to be reached. Because Lilith is dead, her ultimate agreement to sleep in Adam's cemetery is a progress towards life. The living alone can sleep. But before she can sleep she has to realize and accept her true condition. The darkness and the cold Vane feels in Adam's cemetery are the darkness and cold of his own existence, and he must accept them to be able to sleep. Only the one who knows of his death can hope for recall to life. But Lilith has to give back what she has stolen before she can sleep. With her, the greater part of the creation fell and was disfigured; it can be restored only by the release of the stolen waters.

It is significant that in MacDonald's conception there is no place for an eternal damnation. Everything that in the beginning was conceived by the Creator returns—even after ages of self-imposed exile—to the original thought which created it: Adam equally with Lilith, and, finally, “the

Shadow,” Satan himself. [41]

“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.” (23)

This insight that the raven reveals to Vane applies also to Lilith and Satan. They too, inasmuch as they are alive, are born from thoughts of the “great Thinker.” As the thoughts of a perfect intelligence cannot be imperfect they have to return to their origin as the highest good (a far higher good than their own autonomy). Their return means the restoration of the creation in the state of perfection that was anticipated initially by the first and highest logos. Vane describes this state, after he has awoken from the sleep, as perfect perception, life and happiness:

The world and my being, its life and mine, were one. The microcosm and macrocosm were at length atoned, at length in harmony! I lived in everything; everything entered and lived in me. To be aware of a thing, was to know its life at once and mine, to know whence we came, and where we were at home— was to know that we are all what we are, because Another is what he is! (255)

Before Lilith at last agreed to sleep she could never admit this dependence upon Another.

In the Christian tradition, the restored creation has been revealed in various images. The most important perhaps of these are the garden of paradise and the heavenly city of Jerusalem. MacDonald uses these two images in the final chapters of *Lilith*. The restoration of the desert to life with the waters Lilith had stolen has its exemplars in the Old Testament, particularly in Isaiah:

water springs up in the wilderness, and torrents flow in the dry land. The mirage becomes a pool, the thirsty land bubbling springs; instead of reeds and rushes, grass shall grow in the rough land where wolves now lurk (35.6-7).

I will open rivers among the sand dunes and wells in the valleys; I will turn the wilderness into pools and dry land into springs of water. I will plant cedars in the wastes, and accacia and myrtle and wild olive; the pine shall grow on the barren heath, side by side with fir and box (41.18-19).

These verses refer to the eschatological promise of God’s reign, which begins

to break out in the last chapters of *Lilith* but is not completed. There are still [42] monsters in the lake that was a dry basin when first traversed by Vane; “So long as exist men and women of unwholesome mind, that lake will still be peopled with loathsomenesses” (256). Nevertheless, the desert has woken and the prophecy of Isaiah seems to be fulfilled:

The desert rejoiced and blossomed as the rose. Wide forests had sprung up, their whole undergrowth flowering shrubs peopled with song-birds. Every thicket gave birth to a rivulet, and every rivulet to its water-song. (257)

The parallels are sufficiently close to assume that MacDonald is alluding to the quoted passages from Isaiah here. And Isaiah is the only Old Testament text which mentions the night monster Lilith outside the kabbalistic tradition. Isaiah says of the desert which will be changed into the promised garden only when the kingdom of God comes: “There too the nightjar Lilit will rest / and find herself a place for repose” (34.14).

The element that revives the desert is water. According to Ezekiel (47.1-12), the fountain of this healing water is inside the temple of the New Jerusalem, an image which makes it possible to connect the two concepts of the garden of paradise and the heavenly city. MacDonald realizes this possibility in the final chapters of *Lilith*. The stream that gives life to the desert no longer rises from the buried hand of Lilith but from the heavenly Jerusalem:

Drawing nearer to the mountain we saw that the river came from its very peak, and rushed in full volume through the main street of the city. It descended to the gate by a stair of deep and wide steps, mingled of porphyry and serpentine, which continued to the foot of the mountain. (260)

This heavenly city that is *axis mundi* and the throne of God is a city for the living who have woken from the sleep. It is built out of living stones, as Bulika, the city of the dead, was built out of dead stones. It is the counter-image and fulfilment of Bulika, as the garden of paradise is the counter-image and fulfilment of the desert:

We stood for a moment at the gate whence issued roaring the radiant river. I know not whence came the stones that fashioned it, but among them I saw the prototypes of all the gems that I had loved upon earth—far more beautiful than they, for these were living stones—such in which I saw, not the intent alone, but the intender too; not the idea alone, but the imbodier [43]

present, the operant outsider: nothing in this kingdom was dead; nothing was mere; nothing only a thing. (261-62)

The gems of the heavenly city are of course an allusion to the description at the end of Revelation (21.10-), but their living transparency is also a metaphor for spiritualized matter: manifested in the shining resurrection body of Christ (and ultimately that of man also).

In Memling's *Last Judgement* too, paradise is spiritual architecture. The blessed climb to paradise up crystal stairs of transformed matter beneath which gems and corals lie. Vane sees a New Jerusalem that displays all the traditional features, but he does not reach the vision of God face to face. The promise of John's gospel: "This is eternal life: to know, thee who alone art truly God" (17.3) is not (yet) fulfilled. A hand leads Vane to a little door into his library. Is the vision of the heavenly Jerusalem merely one of the dreams that come to him in his sleep? Does the heavenly city already exist at the centre of things? Out of Vane's visions, one image emerges with great clarity: the unfinished state of creation.

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 breakthrough. Sometimes when I am abroad, a like thing takes place; the heavens and the earth, the trees and the grass appear for a moment to shake as if about to pass away. (263-64)

After the terrors of the First World War, the architect Bruno Taut thought up a gigantic project, using huge structures of glass, to change the shape of the Alps into fantastic-organic (by which he meant "living") forms: the symbol of a coming age of peace.¹¹ A visionary transparent architecture to change the world and to change man. Even if such a project seems merely utopian, it nevertheless aims at something that, in potential, already sleeps in matter: a crystal city.

Notes

1. Scholem, Gerschom. *Von der mystischen Gestalt der Gottheit*. Zurich, 1962, p.186.
2. Kiefer used the Lilith theme in several paintings. This picture was exhibited in the Kiefer exhibition at the Nationalgalerie, Berlin 10 Mar.-20 May 1991, and is illustrated on page 64 of the exhibition catalogue. [44]
3. MacDonald George. *Lilith*. 1895. Whitethorn CA: Johannesen, 1994. All references are to this edition.
4. For example: "Of God's gifts, a baby is the greatest." *At the Back of the North Wind*. 1871. Johannesen, 1993, p.311.

5. Ranke-Graves, Robert von. *Raphael Patai, Hebräische Mythologie*. Reinbeck bei Hamburg: Rowoalt 1990, pp. 208-09.
6. MacDonald was probably also thinking of contemporary industrial cities, where children were “devoured” by terrible working and living conditions: a theme he explores extensively in *At the Back of the North Wind*. This was also, of course, a major concern of Ruskin’s.
7. Memling’s painting is in the National Museum, Gdansk.
8. A reproduction of this painting is published in: Jencks, Charles. *Die Postmoderne: Der Neue Klassizismus in Kunst und Architektur*. Stuttgart: Klett 1987, p. 100.
9. In *Der Wille zur Macht*, Nietzsche remarks that “we therefore have a feeling of the enormous vastness—but also of the enormous emptiness—before us; and the sensitivity of all higher men in our century is to get over this terrible *feeling of dreariness*.” (quoted in Löwith, Karl. *Nietzsches Philosophie der Ewigen Wiederkehr des Gleichen*. Stuttgart: Goldmann 1956, p.56. The Nietzsche quotation in the text is from volume 2 of *Dionysos Dithyramben*. München: 1974, p.187.
10. Those who sleep in Adam’s cemetery grow younger. Vane notices this happening to his mother (226). The restored state of the creation is spring.
11. Taut, Bruno. *Alpine Architektur*. Hagen: 1919. **[45]**