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Chapter 8: *Lilith's* Dantean Homecoming Structure

Michael Wayne Wilhelm

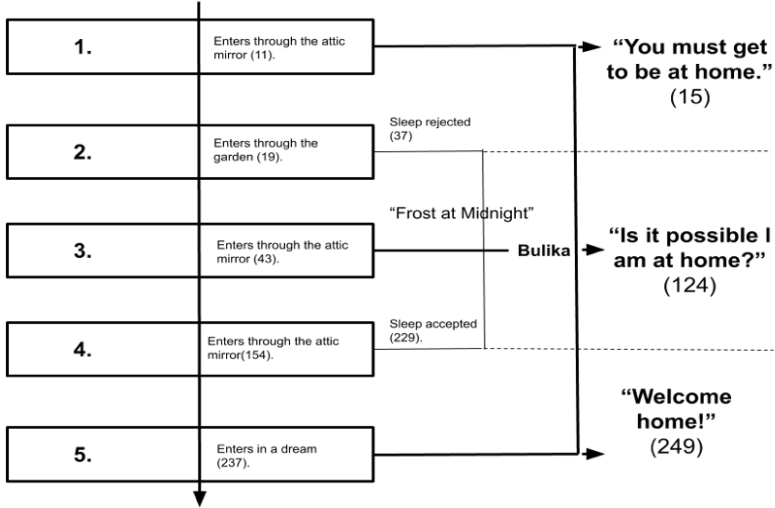
The following essay appears as chapter 8 in the author's recently defended dissertation, "Repentance for a Scientific Age: The Imaginative Apologetics of George MacDonald's *Lilith*." The dissertation shows how *Lilith* is a bibliographic vision of repentance that is shaped and directed by a tumult of carefully selected literary allusions. This chapter introduces new insights to *Lilith* studies, revealing an intricate structure that is reliant on Dante's *Commedia*.

Introduction

MacDonald's son Ronald has called *Lilith* and *Phantastes* "two strange sphinxes" for good reason (R. MacDonald 66). Both books appear as great riddles. One thing *Lilith* does best is bait the persistent reader into its stereoscopic terrain in search of meaning—especially an overall structure and a pattern. It teases and tempts the intellect with suggestions of a unifying framework, yet continually manages to elude capture.

While *Lilith* will never surrender to analysis, it does have a unifying framework. No surprise, it comes from Ante-Purgatory. In his mid-life and later years, MacDonald was often busy giving lectures on great literature, with Dante lectures increasing in frequency as time went by (Rick et al.). One particular passage of greatest interest to MacDonald comes from *Purgatorio* Canto II, where Dante says, "My Casella, in order to return another time to this place where I am, do I make this journey" (II.92).¹ In a lecture given in 1890 at Stephenson Street Congregational Church, MacDonald makes this grand assertion, calling it, "one of the finest paradoxes" he ever encountered. He clarifies and says, "What Dante means is, 'I am going this journey in order that I may get back to the home where I am now, namely, to the heart of God'" ("Dante" 15). This important paradox from Dante gives *Lilith* a symmetrical structure:

“To return again there where I am.” (*Purgatorio* II.92)



“What Dante means is, ‘I am going this journey in order that I may get back to the home where I am now, namely, to the heart of God.’” George MacDonald, Lecture at Stephenson Street Congregational Church, 1890. *Wingfold*, No. 49.

Fig. 1. The Five Trips to the Seven Dimensions²

This structure from Dante is a three-fold treatment of *Lilith’s* reigning riddle conjoined with the five trips into the region of the seven dimensions. Intercalated at its heart is Coleridge’s poem “Frost at Midnight,” which begins with these lines:

The Frost performs its secret ministry,
 Unhelped by any wind. The owlet’s cry
 Came loud—and hark, again! loud as before.
 The inmates of my cottage, all at rest... (1-5)

and ends with these lines:

the secret ministry of frost
 Shall hang them up in silent icicles,
 Quietly shining to the quiet Moon. (72-74)

In his second trip into the region of the seven dimensions, Vane is taken to the Sexton’s cottage. He describes the air “as of an ice-house” (*Lilith* 32), and the Sexton’s wife says, “The moon is rising; she will soon be here” (33). Vane goes on to say, “Even as she spoke the moon looked in at an opening in the wall, and a thousand gleams of white responded to her shine” (33). Vane is asked to take his place on a couch among the dead beneath a moon that he

describes as

colder than any moon in the frostiest night of the world, where she shone direct upon them, cast a bluish, icy gleam on the white sheets and the pallid countenances—but it might be the faces that made the moon so cold! (33)

The Sexton explains to Vane, “Our moon . . . is not like yours—that old cinder of a burnt-out world; her beams embalm the dead, not corrupt them” (35). Vane’s refusal to accept the Sexton’s invitation to sleep sets off a cascade of events comprising much of the book. In fact, the moon and frost will continually be at work from this point forward until Vane finally accepts his sleep (229).³ The moon continually watches over Vane’s activity, providing protection in the night amongst the monsters of the Bad Burrow (49), and giving guidance to the sanctuary of Mara’s cottage (72). As should be expected with *Lilith*’s mythopoeia, the “Frost at Midnight” imagery is infused with meaning from other sources. In this case, it is Matthew 11:28, where Jesus says, “Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest,” that is enriching the image with additional meaning (28, 214). Vane has been given the frost and the moon to prepare him for rest. This imagery is at the heart of Vane’s repentance.

The *Purgatorio* II.92 passage and Coleridge’s poem work together to give *Lilith* its three-part structure:



Fig. 2. *Lilith*’s 3-part structure.⁴

While *Lilith* is an eruption of cross-pollinated allusions from great literature, Dante and Coleridge stand out, serving a key function in the book. At the risk of oversimplifying an extraordinarily complex work, one could say this about *Lilith*'s composition: Dante directs and Coleridge dissolves. Dante's treatment of Ante-Purgatory works primarily in the light of day, framing the vision with meaning as it moves all things to the gate of Purgatory. Coleridge's "Frost at Midnight," on the other hand, works at night, dissolving dualistic illusions in the dark places that are deep within and beneath Vane's consciousness. Once again, a complementary "action-contemplation" aspect can be noticed here.

The framework begins when Vane discovers, through Mr. Raven's riddle, that though he is at home, he is not at home (15, 45). It is important to note that MacDonald chose to preface the final published version of *Lilith* with an excerpt from Thoreau's transcendental essay, "Walking" (2-3). The excerpt describes a nature meditation that progresses from metaphor to mystery. Two worlds appear at once, "as the muddy bottom of a pool is sometimes seen through the reflected skies" (2). This image is key to understanding the relationship between Vane's home and Bulika. As Mr. Raven says, "Ah, the two worlds! So strangely are they one, / And yet so measureless wide apart!" (147).⁵ This is how MacDonald treats Lilith's riddle. The journey home is long and arduous, yet Vane never actually leaves home to do it. Echoing the words from MacDonald's Stephenson Street Congregational Church lecture, Mr. Raven says, "To go back, you must go through yourself, and that way no man can show another" (23). Discovering Bulika is a journey inward, that in time will take him onward. Vane must leave a home blinded by science to discover his home in Hell, reclaim it, and thus, find his way home.

Leaving a Home Blinded by Science

The first leg of the journey reveals Vane's scientific bias. He has returned home from completing his studies at Oxford and is now devoted to the study of physical sciences. There is a change, however, taking place in Vane:

It was chiefly the wonder they woke that drew me. I was constantly seeing, and on the outlook to see, strange analogies, not only between the facts of different sciences of the same order, or between physical and metaphysical facts, but between physical hypotheses and suggestions glimmering out of the metaphysical dreams into which I

was in the habit of falling. (5)

The observations of Vane's empiricism are producing in him a Romantic reawakening. For this reason, allusions to Wordsworth's poetry abound in this first stage of Vane's repentance. In this opening passage, Vane also mentions the habit of falling into metaphysical dreams, an early clue that *Lilith* should be understood as a metaphysical dream. Vane then makes this important disclosure:

I was at the same time much given to a premature indulgence of the impulse to turn hypothesis into theory. Of my mental peculiarities there is no occasion to say more. (5)

This remark is telling. Vane calls his impulse to turn hypothesis into theory "a premature indulgence" (5). In other words, he is reconsidering the soundness of his habit of quickly jumping from "wonder" to "explanation." It is a hunch soon confirmed in his first trip through the mirror, when Mr. Raven says, "We do not waste our intellects in generalising, but take man or bird as we find him" (14). This inaugural trip through the garret mirror into the region of the seven dimensions naturally startles Vane. He apparently had no prior knowledge of his garret and its strange mirror, and says,

If I know nothing of my own garret . . . what is there to secure me against my own brain? Can I tell what it is even now generating?—what thought it may present me the next moment, the next month, or a year away? What is at the heart of my brain? What is behind my THINK? Am I there at all?—Who, what am I? (16)

This reflection is calling into question Descartes' foundational contribution to Enlightenment rationalism, where he has famously said: "After everything has been most carefully weighed, it must finally be established that this pronouncement 'I am, I exist' is necessarily true every time I utter it or conceive it in my mind," therefore concluding he is, "precisely nothing but a thinking thing" (493).⁶ Furthermore, as apparitions begin appearing in the library, Vane calls to mind his grandfather, old Sir Ralph, and says, ". . . old Sir Ralph believes in nothing he could not see or lay hold of" (*Lilith* 8). As *Lilith* is a journey inward, characters should be understood as projections from Vane's imagination, revealing various parts of himself. This mention of Sir Ralph's physicalism is continuing to reveal a stubborn bias Vane must abandon.

Awakening a Bookworm

MacDonald prescribes a twofold remedy for Vane's blindness.

First, he must acquire a new way of reading. For this reason, Mr. Raven does not take Vane back to the library for his second trip into the region of the seven dimensions. Instead, he takes him through the garden. Vane observes Mr. Raven plunging his beak into the moist ground and drawing out a great wriggling red worm. “He threw back his head, and tossed it in the air. It spread great wings, gorgeous in red and black, and soared aloft.”⁷ Vane protests, saying, “You mistake, Mr. Raven: worms are not the larva of butterflies!” (20). The exchange that ensues is a clever allegory of MacDonald’s case for multilevel meaning established in his essay “The Fantastic Imagination” (20).⁸ Furthermore, it appears to be another instance of an image from Vane’s science books being transformed by Dante. A casual reading of *Lilith* will find worms throughout the novel.⁹ Here it is important to recall once again that Vane has been reading Maxwell and Darwin. Both Edinburgh alumni were contemporaries of MacDonald, and their writings were popular during his lifetime. *The Formation of Vegetable Mould Through the Action of Worms* was Darwin’s last work, published in 1881. Though it is now an obscure book with an awkward title, we are told that it was a strong seller at the time.¹⁰ Worms, like ellipses and polarized light, would have found a place in Vane’s Victorian imagination, as seen in an 1882 illustration by Edward Linley Sambourne (see fig. 3).



Fig. 3. *Man is but a worm*. Edward Linley Sambourne, *Punch's Almanack for 1882*, engraving.

Darwin conducted fascinating research regarding the behavior of earthworms, discovering their extreme sensitivity to vibrations, and their surprising sensitivity to light (19-27). Mr. Vane's journey in the fourth dimension is inhabited with worm-monsters who exhibit these same behaviors, suggesting that his dreams have been pollinated by his Darwin readings.¹¹ Moreover, under the influence of Dante's fourth dimension, worm images from Darwin would be capable of about anything, including the transformation into butterflies:

Do ye not comprehend that we are worms,
Born to bring forth the angelic butterfly
That flieth unto judgment without screen?

Why floats aloft your spirit high in air?
Like are ye unto insects undeveloped,

Even as the worm in whom formation fails! (*Purgatorio* X.124-9)

MacDonald's "worms-to-butterflies" imagery appears to summon this passage from Dante, "dissolving, diffusing, and dissipating" the Darwin images "in order to recreate" (Coleridge 325). Vane's imagination under the influence of Dante is being recast, and this is just one more example.

Two important things happen with this image from *Purgatorio*. First, and most obvious, Vane is being called to repentance. Here in Canto X, Dante is showing that the prideful are like foolish insects who would attempt to rise to the heavens as larvae without first descending and accepting slumber for their appointed change. This, of course, is presumptuous and absurd. A second thing happens with this image. The Raven criticizes Vane's approach to reading, accusing him of treating books as dead larvae in the ground, and his library, "nothing but a catacomb!" (*Lilith* 30). Vane learns this the hard way in the next trip through the mirror. He observes Mr. Raven tossing another worm into the air that changes and takes flight (46). Vane says, "Plainly a bird-butterfly, it flew with a certain swallowy double. Its wings were very large, nearly square, and flashed all the colours of the rainbow" (47). The square wings and swallowy double mechanics are no doubt describing a book. The light, color, and animation show the effect of Dante's fourth dimension on the book. Its luminescence gives Vane guidance and comfort in an otherwise dark, foreboding night. The hope of this scene, however, quickly spoils. Overcome with delight, Vane grabs the bird-butterfly, and by doing so, unwittingly kills it and extinguishes its light:

To my unspeakable delight, it began to sink toward me. Slowly at first, then swiftly it sank, growing larger as it came nearer. 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. I threw it in the air—only to hear it fall among the heather. Burying my face in my hands, I sat in motionless misery. (47)

Lilith's allegorical treatment of "The Fantastic Imagination" becomes even more evident here:

Let fairytale of mine go for a firefly that now flashes, now is dark, but may flash again. Caught in a hand which does not love its kind, it will turn to an insignificant, ugly thing, that can neither flash nor fly... We spoil countless precious things by intellectual greed. ("The Fantastic Imagination" 225)

Weinrich has noted that this essay was published at the same time MacDonald was editing the *Lilith* manuscripts.¹² So this seems to be a particular idea that MacDonald was holding at the time. It suggests that even a great author like Dante will not illuminate a scientific mind, so long as such a mind refuses to relinquish its intellectual greed. Like Mr. Raven, Vane must repent of his stingy bookworm nature and "wake among the butterflies" (*Lilith* 23).

Discovering Beauty

Beauty is the second remedy MacDonald commends as an aid to dislodge a scientific mind from dead physicalism. In Vane's second trip into the region of the seven dimensions, he gives this description of Mr. Raven's wife:

What a change had passed upon her! It was as if the splendour of her eyes had grown too much for them to hold, and, sinking into her countenance, made it flash with a loveliness like that of Beatrice in the white rose of the redeemed. Life itself, life eternal, immortal, streamed from it, an unbroken lightning. Even her hands shone with a white radiance, every "pearl-shell helmet" gleaming like a moonstone. Her beauty was overpowering; I was glad when she turned it from me. (32)

While most of the bibliographic images in the final published version of *Lilith* have been artistically muted, this is one case where MacDonald tips his hand. What is especially noteworthy here, however, is the source. It is true that Dante describes Beatrice's overwhelming beauty in the *Commedia*, but in

reality MacDonald has invoked Dante's earlier work, *Vita Nuova*.

<i>Lilith</i>	<i>La Vita Nuova</i>
<p>What a change had passed upon her! It was as if the splendour of her eyes had grown too much for them to hold, and, sinking into her countenance, made it flash with a loveliness like that of Beatrice in the white rose of the redeemed. Life itself, life eternal, immortal, streamed from it, an unbroken lightning. Even her hands shone with a white radiance, every "pearl-shell helmet" gleaming like a moonstone. Her beauty was overpowering; I was glad when she turned it from me. (32)</p>	<p>Love says of her: 'how can flesh drawn from clay, / achieve such beauty and such purity?' / He looks again and to himself he swears / that God intended something new for the earth. / Her color is the paleness of the pearl, / in measure suited to her graciousness; / she is the highest nature can achieve / and by her mould all beauty tests itself. / From out her eyes, wherever they may move / come spirits that are all aflame with Love; / they pierce the eyes of any one that looks / and pass through til each one finds the heart; / upon her face you see depicted Love, / there where none dares to hold its gaze too long. (36)</p>

Fig. 4. *Lilith* and *Vita Nuova*.¹³

Here in MacDonald's scene with Mr. Raven's wife, Vane, like the young Florentine poet, has been quickened by the beauty of a female soul. The indebtedness to Dante's *Vita Nuova* is unmistakable and is surely intended by MacDonald to be more of Vane's bibliographic vision.¹⁴

MacDonald addresses the role of human love and beauty in the formation of a soul in his essay titled "Sketch of Individual Development." After early childhood moments of transcendence, he describes this common consequence of institutional learning:

And now, probably at school, or in the first months of his college-life, a new phase of experience begins. He has wandered over the border of what is commonly called science, and the marvel of facts multitudinous, strung upon the golden threads of law, has laid hold upon him. His intellect is seized and possessed by a new spirit. For a time knowledge is pride; the mere consciousness of knowing is the

reward of its labour; the ever recurring, ever passing contact of mind with a new fact is a joy full of excitement, and promises an endless delight. (39)

This might be considered a fitting description of Mr. Vane during his early years at Oxford. His essay goes on to describe the following result:

For at the entrance of Science, nobly and gracefully as she bears herself, young Poetry shrinks back startled, dismayed. Poetry is true as Science, and Science is holy as Poetry; but young Poetry is timid and Science is fearless, and bears with her a colder atmosphere than the other has yet learned to brave. It is not that Madam Science shows any antagonism to Lady Poetry; but the atmosphere and plane on which alone they can meet as friends who understand each other, is the mind and heart of the sage, not of the boy. (40)

This could easily be regarded as the gestating thought of *Lilith*. That is to say, the young Oxford graduate is on a pilgrimage to rescue and reinstate Lady Poetry from her exile, and in doing so, become a true sage. In the meantime, such a young man, so long as he is bereft of Poetry, becomes lost in the meaningless abyss of corpuscular physics:

What, alas! have evaporation, caloric, atmosphere, refraction, the prism, and the second planet of our system, to do with “sad Hesper o’er the buried sun?” From quantitative analysis how shall he turn again to “the rime of the ancient mariner,” and “the moving moon” that “went up the sky, and nowhere did abide”? From his window he gazes across the sands to the mightily troubled ocean: “What is the storm to me any more!” he cries; “it is but the clashing of countless water-drops!” (39)

MacDonald then describes a temporary reprieve from the despair: “an angel to deliver him from this horror—this stony look—ah, God! of soulless law” (39). It is the beauty of a woman and the enchantment of human love that rekindles hope in this otherwise meaningless storm of particle physics. Elizabeth Robinson has noted MacDonald’s belief “that when a man loved a woman with a pure love, that love could blossom and grow into a love for God” (139). This Neoplatonic idea finds some of its finest expression in Dante’s *La Vita Nuova*, as well as *The Blue Flower* by Novalis and Spenser’s *Fowre Hymnes*.¹⁵ It is no secret that MacDonald cherished all of these works. While Spenser is not part of Vane’s bibliographic vision, the influence of Dante’s *La Vita Nuova* and Novalis is clear.¹⁶ Thus, Robinson has called attention to an important belief held by MacDonald that gives insight into

Lilith's Beatrice image. Human love has the potential to awaken divine love, and beauty, as MacDonald says elsewhere, "is the only stuff in which Truth can be clothed" ("The Fantastic Imagination" 315). He describes how these transcendent gifts can induce a reviving sense of re-enchantment:

With this love in his heart, a man puts on at least the vision robes of the seer, if not the singing robes of the poet . . . in the light of his love—a light that passes outward from the eyes of the lover—the world grows alive again, yea radiant as an infinite face. He sees the flowers as he saw them in boyhood, recovering from an illness of all the winter, only they have a yet deeper glow, a yet fresher delight, a yet more unspeakable soul. ("Sketch" 53)

This seems to describe the function of Beatrice in the life of Dante the poet, MacDonald the Victorian writer, and Vane the young Oxford graduate. Human love and beauty bear witness to something that is forever beyond the reach of the scientist's finest instruments. To borrow a term from Peter L. Berger, they are signals of transcendence (Berger 53). They invite the gaze upward, beyond the symbol of clay, to contemplate her true Maker. MacDonald says, "Science will never find the face of God; while those who would reach his heart, those who, like Dante, are returning thither where they are, will find also the spring-head of his science" ("The Truth" 464). Vane's time with Dante is awakening him to the transcendent, initiating the early stages of repentance from his scientific leanings. As this occurs, he experiences the humility that beauty brings; thus, he is unable, like Dante, to hold his gaze too long.

Discovering a Home in Hell

The first leg of Vane's journey exposes his scientific blindness, and his intellect is now awakening to his imagination. The second leg of the journey reveals the moral ruin that has occurred as a result of his scientism. After reading a manuscript left by his father, he is ashamed of his refusal to trust Mr. Raven, and wants to go back and make things right in the region of the seven dimensions. He hurriedly rushes through the garret mirror to discover a confusing bombardment of strange visions.

The visions seem to lack any overall coherence, which can be extremely frustrating for the reader. The sequence of events goes like this: Vane has night-time visions of frightening worm monsters and violent specters. He awakens to find himself in a scene not unlike Lilliput, only to find that the inhabitants are young children, and their neighbors are uncouth,

weak-minded giants. He escapes the giants' captivity and goes out into the night where he receives hospitality from a mysterious woman named Mara. He learns more of an evil princess in a city named Bulika and heads out the next day in search of the city, supposing it is something he must do.

Along the way, he receives two more night visions. First, he witnesses ornately dressed renaissance dancers in an ivy hall. The dancers are vaporous specters, and they have repulsive bare skulls instead of faces. The next vision is a pair of squabbling skeletons who were an aristocratic married couple in life. The next day, Vane discovers what seems to be the lifeless corpse of a woman. He spends many days reviving her near an odd stream that appears to be a ditch. The water is unpleasant to drink, hot with a strange metallic taste. The woman turns out to be a sort of vampiress who is weakening Vane by drawing his blood at night while he sleeps. When she is fully restored, it becomes known that she is the Princess of Bulika. She lies to Vane about her leaching, is arrogant, and has strange bewitching powers. The Princess is not interested in Vane and takes off in a shapeshifting form for Bulika. Vane follows.

Bulika is a gray, lifeless fortress: “. . . no water, no flowers, no sign of animals” (*Lilith* 116). And there are no children, only hateful, joyless inhabitants who resemble the Bad Giants from the forest. But unlike the Bad Giants of the forest, these urban dwellers have acquired some wealth, power, and prestige. Bulika seems to resemble the ruins of a neglected, ancient castle more than a city. Vane finds his way to the princess's palace, where he is ultimately seduced by her. He wakes up from the vision back at his house, in the large courtyard fountain of his estate. It is easy to see how *Lilith* might be misunderstood as a “wild phantasmagoria of nonsense” (Cust).

The key to intelligibility lies in an understanding of Dante's *Inferno*. This can be easy to miss, especially since MacDonald was no fan of the *Inferno*. He says, “Take any of those wicked people in Dante's hell, and ask wherein is justice served by their punishment” (“Justice” 512). So while *Lilith* has a few allusions to *Paradiso* and is loaded with imagery from *Purgatorio*, it is not surprising that *Inferno* images are harder to find. But closer inspection shows that Vane's puzzling, disjointed nightmare that ends in Bulika relies heavily on the *Inferno* for its blueprint. It is best understood by considering the entirety of MacDonald's criticism of Dante's *Inferno*. He goes on to say,

Mind, I am not saying it is not right to punish them; I am saying that justice is not, never can be, satisfied by suffering—nay, cannot have

any satisfaction in or from suffering. Human resentment, human revenge, human hate may. Such justice as Dante's keeps wickedness alive in its most terrible forms. The life of God goes forth to inform, or at least give a home to victorious evil. Is he not defeated every time that one of those lost souls defies him? All hell cannot make Vanni Fucci say "I was wrong."

This criticism circles back to his differences with the Scottish Calvinism he encountered in his youth. He insists that punishment (accompanied by suffering) might be justified, but it cannot remove evil, and furthermore, whenever permanent, cannot be just. In other words, he is emphasizing that poenia is not metanoia. So, MacDonald does not necessarily object to punishment, only the permanent picture of it painted by Dante.

After returning from his 1889 lecture tour, MacDonald began writing *Lilith*, at least partly with the intent of providing a "loftier version of a purgatorial hell, a realm, in which no one, not even evil incarnate, would be compelled to 'abandon hope'" ("600 Years" 38). The discoveries Vane makes on his third trip into the region of the seven dimensions are based on Dante's *Inferno*—the *action* of Vane's fourth trip into the region of the seven dimensions shows MacDonald's commitment to a "loftier version." MacDonald's reworking of the *Inferno* is noticeably humane, with two primary innovations. First, it ignores Dante's ecclesiastical concerns. And second, it harrows hell.

The Upper Region of Hell

The evil that Vane first encounters comes from Dante's Upper Hell. The journey begins with a pair of night-time visions. The first is the Bad Burrow of frightening worm monsters (Chapter X). The second is a dark dream in the Evil Wood with a tumult of warring shadow armies (Chapter XI). The two visions serve to inform the upcoming episode in the forest with the Little Ones and Bad Giants. The worm monsters are the psychical phantasms that will always exist, "so long as exist men and women of unwholesome mind" (*Lilith* 244). The shadow armies seem to suggest that wrath is a primitive response to things poorly illuminated by truth. In any case, the two visions beneath the watchful moon are followed by a new setting under the sun, with live characters that interact with Vane. He is greeted by the Little Ones, who are miniature children. They are innocent, yet naive and underdeveloped. He is soon discovered and taken captive by Bad Giants. They are Little Ones who have grown to become wrathful, greedy,

gluttonous, and lazy (60, 63-65). Vane calls them “a sort of fungoid people, with just enough mind to give them motion and the expressions of anger and greed” (58). These sins are treated by Dante in his upper region of hell, and for the repentant, they are treated in the seven terraces of Mount Purgatory. These primitive passions come stock-in-trade with the human condition. Vane’s captors are inept, and it seems he could escape at any time (which he does). His greatest danger is not abuse, but degeneration. Vane must flee before he loses himself and becomes a Bad Giant.

The Lower Region of Hell

MacDonald may not approve of every aspect of Dante’s hell, but he does find his “upper vs. lower” distinction helpful. He says,

Of all who will one day stand in dismay and sickness of heart, with the consciousness that their very existence is a shame, those will fare the worst who have been consciously false to their fellows; who, pretending friendship, have used their neighbour to their own ends; and especially those who, pretending friendship, have divided friends. To such Dante has given the lowest hell. (“The Final Unmasking” 602)

Lower Hell, for Dante, is for those who have sinned against others through deceit. Rather than primitive passions getting the better of the weak and undisciplined, the sins here are more diabolical because of their planning and deliberation. Moreover, they are sins that do more harm to others than those of Upper Hell, and therefore are treacherous. *Lilith* makes good use of this distinction. The Upper Hell and Lower Hell episodes of Vane’s vision are separated by a night at Mara’s cottage. She is the symbol of repentance and prepares Vane for the journey ahead. Whereas most of the repentance orchestrated by Mara involves suffering and scratches, this night in her cottage gives consolation.¹⁷ It seems Vane needs comfort, nourishment, and guidance to prepare him for the journey ahead: the awful descent into the worst hell of his soul. He is going to Bulika.

Following the same pattern as the Upper Hell episode, the Lower Hell episode is preceded by two macabre visions that give meaning to what is ahead. The first vision is the skull-faced specters dancing in the ivy hall (Chapter XVI). Seeing them, Vane asks, “Had they used their faces, not for communication, not to utter thought and feeling, not to share existence with their neighbours, but to appear what they wished to appear, and conceal what they were?” (*Lilith* 86). The second vision is the bickering skeleton couple

(Chapter XVII). The first vision prepares Vane for the duplicity of the disaster he is about to face. The second vision shows his culpability in the matter. While Vane has been engrossed in science books, his abandoned imagination has become the Queen of Hell (205).

Geographically, the Upper Hell and Lower Hell regions of *Lilith* are separated by a hot stream with a “strange metallic taste” (99). Oddly, it is the only water found in the region of the seven dimensions, “everywhere deep, and full to the brim, but nowhere more than a few yards wide” (99). This fixed divide is borrowing imagery from Canto XIV of the *Inferno*. In the last circle of Upper Hell, Virgil and Dante come to “a slender watercourse” (I.XIV.77). Virgil explains, saying this tight channel is the convergence of the rivers of hell as they make their final descent to Cocytus. The headwater of hell’s rivers, he explains, comes from the Old Man of Crete, who is fashioned of gold, silver, brass, iron, and clay (I.XIV.103-110). He is everywhere cracked (except the gold), and tears drip through the fissures, becoming the Acheron, Styx, and Phlegethon before converging in this narrow channel that flows into Cocytus. The water would be foul and hot, having passed through the abominations of Dante’s Upper Hell. Someone foolish enough to drink from it would likely notice a strange metallic taste due to its source. This imagery informs the hot stream of *Lilith*. The Princess of Bulika tells Vane that some magical spell prohibits her from crossing to the region of the Little Ones (131). This should not be surprising, since the narrow sluice is found in the seventh circle of the *Inferno*, bordering the abyss that separates the Upper and Lower Regions of hell. Bulika and its Evil Princess are from the lower region. They belong there and are stuck there. Little does Vane know, but their dilemma is his dilemma.

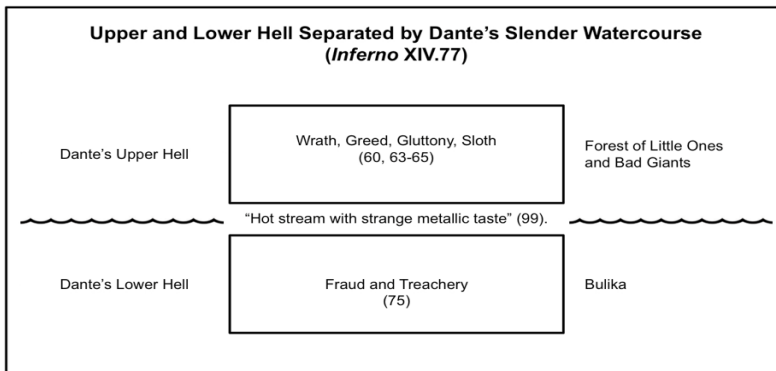


Fig. 5. Dante’s influence on *Lilith*.

Lilith's Evil Princess *femme fatale* symbol is informed by an array of antecedents culminating in Lilith (see The *Femme Fatale* in chapter 5). One of the important elements that has been overlooked in *Lilith* studies is Thaïs from Canto XVIII. She and the other Flatterers have been condemned to the second pouch of the Malebolge: a pungent ditch filled with human excrement. The Flatterers are hardly recognizable because their faces and hair are besmirched with feces. Thaïs is a courtesan from Terence's second-century BC play, *Eunuchus*.¹⁸ She has used her sexuality and flattery to get what she wants, thus finding herself in this foul region of Dante's Malebolge. Dante describes her as a "disheveled wench who is scratching herself there with her filthy nails" (I.XVIII.29-32).

The wasted body of the Evil Princess is naked when discovered by Vane. This follows suit with Thaïs, as the inhabitants of the Malebolge are shamefully such. When *Lilith*'s Evil Princess is revived, she immediately inquires of her clothes and her jewels (106). Most conspicuous is the attention given to her hair that begins with this exchange with Vane:

"I cannot tell how long you had lain when I found you, but there was nothing left of you save skin and bone: that is more than three months ago.—Your hair was beautiful, nothing else! I have done for it what I could."

"My poor hair!" she said, and brought a great armful of it round from behind her; "—it will be more than a three-months' care to bring YOU to life again!—I suppose I must thank you, although I cannot say I am grateful!"

"There is no need, madam: I would have done the same for any woman—yes, or for any man either!"

"How is it my hair is not tangled?" she said, fondling it.

"It always drifted in the current."

"How?—What do you mean?"

"I could not have brought you to life but by bathing you in the hot river every morning."

She gave a shudder of disgust, and stood for a while with her gaze fixed on the hurrying water. (107-108)

While it is always unwise to jump to quick conclusions with MacDonald's mythopoeia, this scene appears to have its footing in the sewery Malebolge. The Evil Princess is acting the part of Dante's Thaïs, who has become famous for her "disheveled" hair:

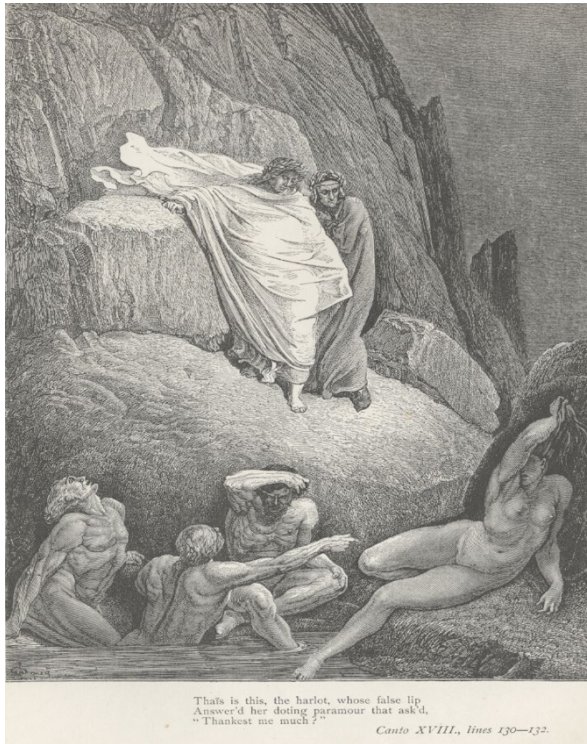


Fig. 6. *The Inferno, Canto 18, lines 130-132*. Gustave Doré, 1861, etching, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Inferno_Canto_18_verses_130-132.jpg

It is no wonder the Princess gives “a shudder of disgust” when Vane reveals that he’s been washing her hair in the hot stream. She knows where this water has been.¹⁹

It is tempting to ascribe the Princess’s obsession with her hair to Rossetti’s “Lady Lilith” painting. There is a connection, and it is certainly true *Lilith*’s Evil Princess *femme fatale* symbol receives import from the Rossetti paintings and poems. But it is not happening here—not *yet*. The Princess’s hair is “black as night” (96). The striking hair of Rossetti’s muse is famously strawberry gold. Later, however, when Mr. Raven exposes the Evil Princess as Lilith, he does so in poetic verse and says, “Hideously wet, my hair of golden hue / Fouled my fair hands . . .” (146). Now in this climactic revelation, the hair color changes to “golden hue,” showing import

from Rossetti's painting and poetry. But the mention of "hideously wet" hair "fouling" her fair hands shows that the memory of the Malebolge still lingers (146).

By introducing the prostitute Thaïs in *Lilith* chapter XIX, MacDonald has drawn attention to the Malebolge. MacDonald is fond of pulling multiple images from a condensed area of a book when weaving *Lilith*'s mythopoeia.²⁰ It is as if Vane's bibliographic vision draws him to certain scenes that become cinematic meditations. The Malebolge resembles a round amphitheater with nine concentric ditches facing a central well. There are arched stone bridges over the ditches that form a path downward. Thaïs brings attention to Canto XVIII. There are two cities mentioned in this Canto: Bologna and Lucca. While much speculation has been made over the years regarding the possible meaning of the name "Bulika," one thing seems obvious: MacDonald is using a playful word blend with the names of these two cities from the Malebolge: "BOL-LUCCA." This does not rule out other meanings, as MacDonald is certainly known for clever punning. But this meaning from Dante is important and should not be overlooked. The physical description of Bulika shows the influence of the Malebolge:

Bulika	Malebolge
<p>But I found its fortifications, like those of the city, much neglected, and partly ruinous. For centuries, clearly, they had been of no account! It had great and strong gates, with something like a drawbridge to them over a rocky chasm; but they stood open, and it was hard to believe that water had ever occupied the hollow before them. (124)</p>	<p>There is a place in Hell called Malebolge, all of stone which is the color of iron, like the wall that goes round it... Such a figure as where, for guard of the walls, successive ditches encircle castles, the place where they are presents, such an image did these make here. And as in such strongholds from their thresholds to the outer bank are little bridges, so from the base of the cliff ran crags which traversed the embankments and the ditches as far as the pit, which cuts them off and collects them....</p>
<p>I turned aside into an alley, and sought shelter in a small archway. (119)</p>	<p>We were now where the narrow path intersects with the second embankment and makes of that the abutment to another arch.</p>
	<p><i>Inferno</i> Canto XVIII</p>

Fig. 7. The influence of Malebolge on Bulika

The arches and archways mentioned of Bulika are images from the Malebolge. Vane is in Dante's Lower Hell. Mara has already given this forlorn description of its inhabitants:

the princess has lived in Bulika, holding the inhabitants in constant terror, and doing what she can to keep them from multiplying. Yet they boast and believe themselves a prosperous, and certainly are a self-satisfied people—good at bargaining and buying, good at selling and cheating; holding well together for a common interest, and utterly treacherous where interests clash; proud of their princess and her power, and despising every one they get the better of; never doubting themselves the most honourable of all the nations, and each man counting himself better than any other. The depth of their worthlessness and height of their vainglory no one can understand who has not been there to see, who has not learned to know the miserable misgoverned and self-deceived creatures. (75)

Apart from Dante's ecclesiastical concerns (the Simonists and Sowers of Scandal), Mara's description shows that Bulika is home to all the treachery of the Malebolge. What Vane discovers in Bulika is that his nightmarish visions in the region of the seven dimensions have been important premonitions. The vision of the skull-faced dancers anticipated the sins of Bulika, causing him to ask, "Had they used their faces, not for communication, not to utter thought and feeling, not to share existence with their neighbours, but to appear what they wished to appear, and conceal what they were?" (86). Much to Vane's displeasure, this is exactly what he finds in Bulika.

What he still does not know is this: *Bulika is his home*. He is seeing "the muddy bottom of a pool . . . seen through the reflected skies" (2). His initial description of the library anticipates the architecture of Bulika and the Malebolge:

Its chief room was large, and the walls of it were covered with books almost to the ceiling; the rooms into which it overflowed were of various sizes and shapes, and communicated in modes as various—by doors, by open arches, by short passages, by steps up and steps down. (6)

In Bulika, after falling asleep "into a profound unconsciousness," he begins to awaken, and asks, "Is it possible I am at home?" (124). In this question, Mr. Raven's riddle is finally coming out:

Home is ever so far away in the palm of your hand, and how to get there it is of no use to tell you. But you will get there; you must get

there; you have to get there. Everybody who is not at home, has to go home. You thought you were at home where I found you: if that had been your home, you could not have left it. Nobody can leave home. And nobody ever was or ever will be at home without having gone there. (45)

Once lecturing on the *Inferno*, MacDonald said, “He is not home down there, and not at his best. It is not a place to linger, even in imagination” (“A Talk” 31). Vane has discovered his error of making a home in hell. He will return to Bulika just once more, this time to remove its Queen. Putting Lilith to rest allows Vane to finally receive his rest under the frosty moon, so that he might resume his journey homeward.²¹

Returning to a Home Redeemed

As one would expect, the third and final leg of the journey leads to the gate of Purgatory. Just as the Romantic poets have been the gentle solvent, inviting rest in the deepest recesses of Vane’s feral soul, so Dante has been driving and directing the vision. This short but important section of *Lilith* features a citation from *Paradiso*, and a parade of images from Ante-Purgatory.

The Sweet Bells

Among the vast and varied import of images, there may be few things more significant toward a proper understanding of *Lilith* than its reference to *Paradiso*, Canto X. *Lilith* is famously a five-year project involving six manuscripts. *Lilith A* was completed in 1890, and the final version, *Lilith F*, was published in 1895. Much of the material was reworked in this editing process, especially between the *Lilith A* and *Lilith B* versions. Weinrich has conducted extensive study of the six editions, and makes this observation regarding a paragraph near the end of the novel in the *B* manuscript:

As in *Lilith A* and all texts onward, everything “showed me its own shape and colour, and the indwelling, informing thought that was their being, and meant their shape and colour.” Their souls enter into his: “the microcosm and macrocosm were at length atoned and in harmony! . . . Now I knew that life and truth were one; that life mere and pure is itself bliss; that where being is not bliss, it is not life, but life-in-death” . . . These sentences remain almost exactly as they were inscribed in the manuscript, so they are among the few passages which MacDonald preserved throughout the revisions. (206)

Considering all the reworking of material noticed throughout the five-year editing process, it is remarkable that this piece remains largely untouched from start to finish. The paragraph ends with a “sweet tinkle” (First 497, *Variorium* 221, 426) that is ultimately rendered as “a sweet tin-tinning” in the final published version (243). Most importantly, the published version reveals that these acoustics are a reference to *Paradiso* (X.142). In other words, it has been Dante’s bells tinkling here all along.

So what are Dante’s bells all about? In this Canto, Dante and Beatrice are circled by twelve bright lights:

And I saw many lights, alive, most bright;
we formed the center, they became a crown,
their voices even sweeter than their splendor . . . (III.X.64-6)

The bright lights are philosophers, and Thomas Aquinas appears as their spokesperson. He introduces himself and the other eleven in his circle, the last being “. . . the everlasting light of Siger, / who when he lectured in the Street of Straw / demonstrated truths that earned him envy” (III.X.136-8). In his lifetime, Siger’s philosophical views were opposed by Aquinas.²² They were later condemned as heretical by the inquisitor of France, and this ultimately led to Siger’s murder. Curiously, Dante has Aquinas and Siger dancing together in his solar vision in Canto X of *Paradiso*. In other words, the bells are celebrating the reconciliation of Siger of Brabant with Thomas Aquinas.

Why are these bells heard tin-tinning in *Lilith*? Hein makes this suggestion:

[Dante] was confronting the problem of conflicting theological stances among earnest scholars and suggesting that, as they stand glorified in the full light of heavenly truth, their differences are forgotten, and they stand in full harmony and love each to the other. MacDonald stands in relation to Dante not unlike Siger in relation to Aquinas. Although MacDonald was at loggerheads with Dante on the issue of the eternality of the consequences of temporal sins, he signaled that morally he held no disdain for Dante himself. He viewed the great Florentine poet as an earnest Christian brother and looked forward to full fellowship with him in eternity. (78)

Admittedly, Hein is correct to note MacDonald’s aversion to Dante’s picture of hell. MacDonald says, “Such justice as Dante’s keeps wickedness alive in its most terrible forms” (“Justice” 318). Considering this complaint alongside MacDonald’s great indebtedness to Dante, Hein’s suggestion is reasonable.

But it seems unlikely that MacDonald would interrupt his novel at this climax to inject his personal feelings about Dante. While it is true that harmony is a theme of Canto X, there seems to be more intended here by MacDonald.

Rather than emphasizing the harmonious outcome of Canto X, MacDonald seems to be calling attention to the solar sphere's *conditions* that make this outcome possible. There are two qualities worth noting. First, it can hold paradox. The scientific materialism of MacDonald's post-Cartesian world suffered from the limits of a three-dimensional mindscape, unable to accommodate paradox. MacDonald shows in *Lilith* that evil is even less, receding to just two dimensions (118). Such a fate, in MacDonald's view, is tied to the Evil Wood with its raging battles, crying out, "*The Truth! The Truth!*" (54). Dante's sphere of the sun, on the other hand, like *Lilith*'s seven dimensions, can hold paradox, making harmony possible. Second, it is imbued with Divine luminescence. The dancers are not mere objects that reflect borrowed light, but instead, are described as "blazing suns" (III.X.76). This idea contains echoes of Daniel's vision, where "those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky above; and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever" (Dan.12:3), and John's luminous vision of the New Jerusalem, with "no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb" (Rev. 21:23). The atomized nature of a post-Cartesian mindscape, on the other hand, is confounded by the shadows it creates. This may be precisely what MacDonald has been driving at all along. His "microcosm and macrocosm" is a nod to Dante's solar theology, with its mystical, unitive aspect. This becomes clear when panning back to include more of the immediate context:

It had ceased to be dark; we walked in a dim twilight, breathing through the dimness the breath of the spring. A wondrous change had passed upon the world—or was it not rather that a change more marvellous had taken place in us? Without light enough in the sky or the air to reveal anything, every heather-bush, every small shrub, every blade of grass was perfectly visible—either by light that went out from it, as fire from the bush Moses saw in the desert, or by light that went out of our eyes. Nothing cast a shadow; all things interchanged a little light . . . The microcosm and macrocosm were at length atoned, at length in harmony! . . . When a little breeze brushing a bush of heather set its purple bells a ringing, I was myself in the joy of the bells, myself in the joy of the breeze to which responded their sweet tin-tinning. (243)

The dance in Dante's sphere of the sun anticipates the Romantic response to the Enlightenment, and in turn, MacDonald's Romantic response to Victorian scientism.



Fig. 8. *The Sparkling Circles of the Heavenly Host*. Gustave Doré, 1868, engraving, *Paradiso*, Canto XII

In "A Sketch of Individual Development," MacDonald considers the appearance of a flower and says, "He cannot believe that its structure exists for the sake of its laws; that would be to build for the sake of its joints a scaffold where no house was to stand. Those who put their faith in Science are trying to live in the scaffold of the house invisible" (58). Repentance from this error will require a renewed solar vision, with Lady Poetry returning from her exile to rejoin Science in a light-drenched promenade. This seems to be the change of mind that Dante has been inducing in Mr. Vane.

Meaning in the Mirror

MacDonald extends this idea with another image that begins with Victorian physical science. Most of the story contained in *Lilith* famously takes place through the mirror discovered in the garret of Mr. Vane's house.

The first time the mirror is described simply as “tall . . . old-fashioned . . . and narrow” (11).²³ The father’s manuscript, on the other hand, modifies the image, describing a rotating chain apparatus that requires synchronization with noonday light (41). Finally, Vane’s return trip through the mirror (his third trip into the region of the seven dimensions) expands the description to reveal a two-mirror apparatus with chains, now suspecting “polarisation as the thing required” (43). It is important again to recall that Vane has been reading Maxwell (6). Among the many contributions Maxwell made to the physical sciences is his work with the polarization of light. This image shows once again how Vane’s imagination has been impregnated with his prior learning. The image being described is a Victorian era polariscope, something like this Brewster model exhibited at the University of Glasgow:



Fig. 9. Polariscope. Christian Norremberg, 1830, University of Glasgow, <http://collections.gla.ac.uk/#/details/ecatalogue/3898>

This device used polarized light as a highly accurate sundial that would work on cloudy days. When Vane and his army of Little Ones sack Bulika and storm the palace, they discover Lilith seated, “waiting the meridional sun” (183). She has positioned another mirror nearby so that she might “receive the full sunlight reflected from her person” (183). MacDonald is cross-pollinating the image of the narcissistic, mirror-wielding “Lady Lilith” Rossetti painting with this apparatus that comes via Maxwell.²⁴ What is the point? Lilith is the upper mirror. And we are told that “close under the mirror stood the Shadow” (183). Once Lilith is finally put to rest in chapter XL,

Vane discovers the polariscope in the attic no longer gives him access to the region of the seven dimensions (237). Physical science is shown once again to serve the vision as scaffolding before being absorbed by it.

Where Maxwell provides the physical scaffolding for the vision, and Rossetti provides the bad moral report, Dante, once again, provides remediation. In Longfellow's translation of Canto XXIII of the *Inferno*, Virgil says to a fear-stricken Dante, "If I were made of leaded glass, / Thine outward image I should not attract / Sooner to me than I imprint the inner" (25-27). MacDonald cites this passage in his sermon titled "The Mirrors of the Lord." It was published in 1889, late in MacDonald's life, dating it to the time that he was lecturing on Dante. Hence it is safe to say that this sermon was written at a time when thoughts of Dante were percolating in anticipation of *Lilith*. Regarding its Canto XXIII reference to *Inferno*, MacDonald says, "Virgil, with reference to the power he had of reading the thoughts of his companion, says to Dante: 'If I were of leaded glass,'—meaning, 'If I were glass covered at the back with lead, so that I was a mirror,'—'I should not draw thy outward image to me more readily than I gain thy inner one;'—meaning, '... I know your thoughts'" ("The Mirrors" 453-454). So, MacDonald has carefully selected this idea from Dante of a mirror holding an image. The emphasis here is on what the mirror *holds*, rather than what it reflects. While the scientist might look at a mirror and analyze the phenomenon, reducing it to a matter of mere physics, MacDonald looks upon the mirror with the eyes of a poet. He says, "The poet deals with the outer show of things, which outer show is infinitely deeper in its relation to truth, as well as more practically useful, than the analysis of the man of science" (452).²⁵

Whether intended or not, dissections usually become autopsies. This is what the mirror of empirical science does. MacDonald calls this "the killing power of a godless science" ("Sketch" 46), a theme that runs thick in his sermon titled "The Truth," and some of his later essays. The poet's mirror, on the other hand, is Truth-telling—unitive, imaginative, and thus meaningful. MacDonald summarizes his sermon, revealing the unmistakable influence of Dante's Canto X solar theology:

It is but that the deeper soul that willed and wills our souls, rises up, the infinite Life, into the Self we call I and me, but which lives immediately from him, and is his very own property and nature—unspeakably more his than ours: this deeper creative soul, working on and with his creation upon higher levels, makes the I and me more and more his, and himself more and more ours; until at length

the glory of our existence flashes upon us, we face full to the sun that enlightens what it sent forth, and know ourselves alive with an infinite life, even the life of the Father; know that our existence is not the moonlight of a mere consciousness of being, but the sun-glory of a life justified by having become one with its origin, thinking and feeling with the primal Sun of life, from whom it was dropped away that it might know and bethink itself, and return to circle for ever in exultant harmony around him. (“Mirrors” 456-457)

The mirror should also be understood as another image plucked from Ante-Purgatory. MacDonald was not so fond of the *Inferno*, and moreover, he is very intentional with his gathering of allusions from *Purgatorio*. The image likely comes on the heels of the dream of the great eagle, where Dante’s pilgrim awakens to see three stairs leading to the gate of Purgatory. He says, “The first step was white marble so polished and so clear that I was mirrored there as I appear in life” (*Purgatorio* IX.94-6). This was an important image to MacDonald. It is reported that when lecturing on Dante at Trinity Church in 1889, he drew attention to “this step of shining marble, in which *they see themselves*” (“Sermon”). Self-knowledge must be the first step to repentance. It is easy to see how this image was important to MacDonald and would find significant play in *Lilith*.

Mr. Vane notices that the tall mirror in his attic, like the poet’s mirror praised by MacDonald, does not reflect. Instead, it beholds “a wild country, broken and heathy” (*Lilith* 11). Dante’s first step up to Purgatory is revealing the feral and uncultivated nature of Vane’s soul: a discovery he must make and a journey he must take. The young Oxford graduate, devoted to the physical sciences, needs repentance. He must change how his mind is falsely perceiving itself in the universe. The poet’s mirror will soon dissolve the stubborn Cartesian illusions of subject-object for the sake of true knowledge. Admittedly, it may be the influence of Coleridge, Novalis, and Goethe, that is most revealed here, but it is Dante who has provided the perfect device.

A Belt of Rushes

Near the end of Vane’s fourth trip into the region of the seven dimensions, he finally accepts his sleep (229). He says, “I grew continuously less conscious of myself, continually more conscious of bliss; unimaginable yet felt” (230). In this “dream within a dream,” the dry, sun-baked terrain has been transformed. Beneath the embalming moon, waters are now flowing. Vane begins to dream of past wrongs with intent of future reconciliation:

Then, of a sudden, but not once troubling my conscious bliss, all the wrongs I had ever done. . . I was the eager slave of all whom I had thus or anyhow wronged. Countless services I devised to render them! For this one I would build such a house as had never grown from the ground! for that one I would train such horses as had never yet been seen in any world! For a third I would make such a garden as had never bloomed, haunted with still pools, and alive with running waters! I would write songs to make their hearts swell, and tales to make them glow! I would turn the forces of the world into such channels of invention as to make them laugh with the joy of wonder! Love possessed me! Love was my life! Love was to me, as to him that made me, all in all! (231)

The dream begins with a pricked consciousness that seems appropriate in this stage of Vane's repentance, but thoughts of restitution spoil into grandiose dreams of invention.²⁶ In other words, Vane becomes intoxicated with his new powers and has presumptuously taken control of his dream. Like the early debacle with the bird-butterfly (47), his intellectual greed spoils the light. Here toward the end of the novel, Vane once again finds himself in solid blackness, alone (231). His company of friends are nowhere to be found. The horrible brood of monsters of the bad borrow reappear. But their burrow has now been flooded, and they are exposed beneath the water of a crystalline lake, "margined with reeds and rushes" (232). The rushes are another image gathered from Ante-Purgatory.

In Canto I, Dante learns that rushes are the only plants that can grow around the shore of Mount Purgatory. Soiled from their passage through the *Inferno*, Virgil is instructed to wash Dante's face and fasten a smooth rush around his waist (II.I.94-6). It is the only plant that can grow where the waves continually break upon the shore. Its lowliness is its strength, therefore called "a humble plant" (II.I.134). When Virgil completes the task, another rush immediately springs up in its place, showing the inexhaustibility of the Divine grace conferred through humility.

This aspect of the rushes is addressed by MacDonald's good friend John Ruskin.²⁷ As a gift, Ruskin gave MacDonald a special copy of his famous five-volume work *Modern Painters*. The third volume of this work offers this important insight:

the Christian virtue is rooted in self-debasement, and strengthened under suffering by gladness of hope . . . Dante tells us he was ordered to descend to the shore of the lake as he entered Purgatory, to gather

a rush, and gird himself with it, it being to him the emblem not only of rest, but of humility under chastisement, the rush (or reed) being the only plant which can grow there;—”no plant which bears leaves, or hardens its bark, can live on that shore, because it does not yield to the chastisement of its waves.” It cannot but strike the reader singularly how deep and harmonious a significance runs through all these words of Dante—how every syllable of them, the more we penetrate it, becomes a seed of farther thought! For, follow up this image of the girding with the reed, under trial, and see to whose feet it will lead us. (Ruskin 248)

Though muted in the published version, the rushes are an obvious feature in the *Lilith A* manuscript, revealing more of MacDonald’s thought. First, there is more to Vane’s grandiose notion of “channels of invention” (231). He says, “I would invent such things, with the help of all I know of physics and mechanics and the forces of the world, as would make glad with wonder!” (*First and Final* 494). This shows how MacDonald continues to contend with the Victorian bent for scientism, inasmuch as scientism is the overconfidence in applied physics.²⁸ The *Lilith A* manuscript treats the folly with more Dante. The sexton tells Vane, “When you come to the swamp, gather a few rushes like Dante, and make a belt for your waist, and then you will be right well equipped, for that garment never wears out” (494). Vane weaves a girdle from the rushes, and this seems to prepare him for the perilous journey ahead through the swamp of horrors (487).

It is little wonder MacDonald was attracted to this image. The monsters are a reminder that repentance will be a lifelong process, certainly never complete this side of the grave.²⁹ Unbridled enthusiasm for the achievements of physical science is a flirtation with the dangers of the swamp. The rushes surrounding the lake are a reminder that the journey of repentance requires constant humility.

The Celestial Helmsman

The great eagle perched on the mirror has already provided the first clue that *Lilith* is a God-haunted vision. MacDonald’s view of repentance is a process of change that occurs in Christ, through Christ, and unto Christ. He makes this clear in his sermon, saying,

when we take into our understanding, our heart, our conscience, our being, the glory of God, namely Jesus Christ as he shows himself to our eyes, our hearts, our consciences, he works upon us, and will

keep working, till we are changed to the very likeness we have thus mirrored in us. ("The Mirrors" 455)

It should thus come as no surprise that the dream concludes with a heart-stirring image of divine agency, a vision of the Celestial City served by a company of luminous beings:

A great angel, attended by a company of shining ones, came down to meet and receive them, but merrily evading them all, up still they ran. In merry dance, however, a group of woman-angels descended upon them, and in a moment they were fettered in heavenly arms. The radiants carried them away, and I saw them no more. (249)

The merry dance continues to show the influence of *Paradiso*'s sphere of the sun:

After those ardent suns, while singing so,
had wheeled three times around us, even as
stars that are close to the fixed poles, they seemed

to me like women who, though not released
from dancing, pause in silence, listening
until new notes invite to new dancing. (III.X.76-81)

Dancing is an important symbol throughout *Paradiso*, emphasizing harmony. The heart of Bulika, with its separated foci forming a black ellipsoid, stands in stark contrast to the sphere of the sun, where Dante and Beatrice together form a single point of focus in a radiant circle of dancers (III.X.56). The harmony and synchronism of the solar dance emits the perfected sound of "joy everlasting" (III.X.148). MacDonald is ingeniously showing that as Vane is rejoined to his estranged Imagination, his black ellipsoid soul is being restored to its true symmetry and brightness. This would explain MacDonald's careful labor over the "tin-tinning" (243).

After this celestial show, the great angel says to Mr. Vane, "Welcome home!" and bends low with the sweetest smile (243). Vane is left speechless, overcome with emotion. He says, "Thought cannot form itself to tell what I felt, thus received by the officers of heaven" (243). Here MacDonald inserts a rare endnote, citing *Purgatorio* (II.30). This is the second of the two Dante citations in the novel, and one of just three citations in the entire work:

He cried: "Make haste, make haste to bow the knee!
Behold the Angel of God! fold thou thy hands!
Henceforward shalt thou see such officers!" (II.II.30)

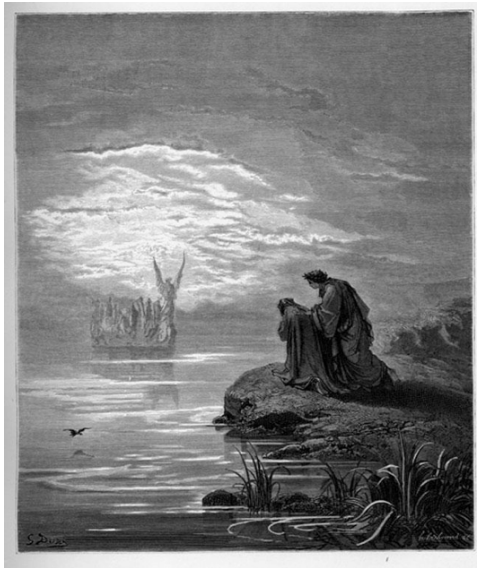


Fig. 10. *Dante Kneeling Before Celestial Helmsman*. Gustave Doré, 1868, engraving.

MacDonald has invoked a moving scene from the *Commedia*, famously illustrated in this engraving by Doré. It is the image of the celestial helmsman piloting a throng of redeemed exiles across the impossible abyss. Their rhapsodic gratitude can be detected from afar, as they are heard singing, “*In exitu Israël de Aegypto*” in one voice (II.II.46).³⁰ This citation near the end of *Lilith* is important for two reasons. First, it emphasizes MacDonald’s Christian worldview, with the need of divine agency in the work of repentance. Second, and perhaps less obvious, is its location in the *Commedia*. After a citation from *Paradiso* and a vision of the Celestial City, MacDonald has circled back to Ante-Purgatory. This demonstrates his aversion to rigid allegory, no doubt, but it is doing something more significant. It shows that MacDonald’s intent all along has been to initiate repentance in Mr. Vane. Ante-Purgatory, as MacDonald continues to insist, is the proper staging area for this initiation.

The Sacred Portal

Finally, most who are unsatisfied with *Lilith*’s “Endless Ending” seem to overlook a few important clues. Vane has not arrived in heaven in the

penultimate chapter as some have suggested. He is still in his library having a vision that began early in the novel. Images from Maxwell and Darwin have at last dissolved before a crescendo of eschatological images of a new heaven and a new earth. But as many perplexed scholars have noted, there is also a menacing “horde of black bats” in the vicinity (249). This is a striking reminder that MacDonald is not writing allegory, but instead, continually melting and mixing primary images in order to recreate (Coleridge 325). The bats are an obvious clue that Vane is not experiencing a stable vision of heaven.

Among the eschatological images now populating Vane’s vision is “the throne of the Ancient of Days” (*Lilith* 250). This is a reference to The Book of Daniel (7:9), but it is accompanied by “three or four great steps of a stair” (250). It seems MacDonald must be cross-pollinating this symbol from Daniel with Dante’s image of the sacred portal of Purgatory:



Fig.11. *Dante and Virgil Approaching the Angel Who Guards the Entrance of Purgatory*. William Blake, 1827, graphite, ink, and watercolor on paper, Tate Gallery, London.

As mentioned above, the attic mirror can be understood as the first of the three steps to this door. Now, under the kaleidoscopic images of a new heaven and new earth, it is important to notice the condition of the terrain beneath Vane and Lona's feet. They are climbing "a huge pile of broken rocks" (250). This simply cannot be heaven. Neither can it be Dante's earthly paradise, which is said to be on level ground (II.XXVIII.5). It seems more likely that Vane is at last climbing Dante's second step to Purgatory, described as "crumbling rock, rough-textured, scorched, with cracks that ran across its length and width, was darker than deep purple" (II.IX.97-9). The mirror of the first step has revealed the horror of what Vane has made of himself. His whitewashed veneer has at last been exposed and crushed, so now he must crawl upward through the shame-scorched rubble. His liberated heart pounds "with hope and desire" (250).

Dante's third and final step, thereafter, reveals the angel of God with both feet resting on a firm foundation that is blood-red in appearance:

The third, resting above more massively, appeared to me to be of porphyry, as flaming red as blood that spurts from veins. And on this upper step, God's angel—seated upon the threshold, which appeared to me to be of adamant—kept his feet planted. (*Purgatorio* IX.100-5)

The angel seated above a crimson surface evokes images of the tabernacle mercy seat. It is the place where mercy and holiness meet, foreshadowing Christ and his atonement. Dante's image suggests that it is divine grace—the Spirit of Christ—that enables repentance; thus, Vane is invited onto this final step with a tender theophany:

At length we drew near the cloud, which hung down the steps like the borders of a garment, passed through the fringe, and entered the deep folds. A hand, warm and strong, laid hold of mine, and drew me to a little door with a golden lock. (250)

The door opens, and the warm, strong hand pushes Vane gently through (250). So here at the end of the novel, Dante has done his work. Vane at last passes through Purgatory's lower gate. As predicted, the "door in" has become to Vane "a door out" (40). The great book closes behind him, and with intellect and imagination now reunited, Vane awakens back in his library, prepared for a life of repentance. Now to begin his life of repentance—his seven-story climb—Vane "must have the education of a world of fellow-men" (103). The so-called liminality of *Lilith's* "Endless Ending" is not only fitting, but also necessary.³¹

The great angel's words, "Welcome home!" complete the

homecoming cycle (249). The celestial vision was just a short glimpse of Vane's new way of seeing home, as "the muddy bottom of a pool . . . seen through the reflected skies" (2). If there is one symbol in all of *Lilith* that ends with a stable one-to-one allegorical meaning, it is this sacred gate. The centripetal vision with its overwhelming array of stereoscopic images converges at this point (250). The door to Vane's library has become the gate of Purgatory.

"The time will come," murmured Lady Mara, "when you must house with me many days and nights" (80). That time has now arrived.

Endnotes

1. See George MacDonald, "*Dante's Divine Comedy, 1890: Inferno, Purgatorio, Paradiso*," *Wingfold*, no. 49, Winter 2005, 15.
2. The 5 trips into the region of the seven dimensions are not scaled to size. The intercalated "Frost at Midnight" inclusio takes up the majority of the book.
3. Additional "Frost at Midnight" imagery sets the climactic scene for Lilith's repentance in chapter XXXIX.
4. The majority of *Lilith* happens in the base of this triangle.
5. "Two objects," I said, "cannot exist in the same place at the same time!" "Can they not? I did not know!—I remember now they do teach that with you. It is a great mistake—one of the greatest ever wiseacre made! No man of the universe, only a man of the world could have said so!" (23)
6. In further rebuttal to Descartes, the *Lilith B* manuscript says, "I had been [haunted] with the nild [sic] terrific notion, that I was under the mesmeric influence of a madman who was causing me to imagine all these things as objects, which were only suggestions and that not even of my own but wholly of his. Of this horrible fear I was now rid of." *Lilith: A Variorum Edition*, vol. 1, 30.
7. The red and black wings may be an allusion to Dante, who is always portrayed in these colors. This would mean Mr. Raven intends to assist Vane by allowing Dante to "grow higher and grow larger" in meaning (20).
8. Ironically, this is an allegorical treatment of a polemic against allegory. See the argument in "The Fantastic Imagination," 320.
9. See Fernando Soto, "The Worm as Metaphor in *Lilith*," *North Wind*, vol. 25, 2016, <http://digitalcommons.snc.edu/northwind/vol25/iss1/9>.
10. See James Buzard, "Darwin, Charles," *The Oxford Encyclopedia*

of *British Literature*, edited by David Scott Kastan, Oxford UP, 2006, <http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195169218.001.0001/acref-9780195169218-e-0126>

11. Making clear the Darwin allusion, the title of chapter VII in the *Lilith* C manuscript is “Earth-Worms.” See *Lilith: A Variorum Edition*, vol. 1, 296.
12. Weinrich notes, “During the summer of 1893 MacDonald also continued work on the revision of *Orts* which included a new essay entitled “The Fantastic Imagination,” a piece which has particular relevance to *Lilith*. While he apparently re-wrote and re-worked the fantasy, he was also producing this treatise on the construction of fairy tales in which he discusses the need for harmony in such works and the possibility of multiple meanings to different readers.” See Elizabeth Weinrich, “The Genesis of George MacDonald’s ‘Lilith,’” 87.
13. See Dante, *Vita Nuova*, translated by Mark Musa, Oxford UP, 2008, 36. It is worth noting that the fluidity, prosimetra, and treatment of earthly love found in *Vita Nuova* is more typical of MacDonald’s earlier work, *Phantastes*. It is also typical of another of MacDonald’s favorites, Novalis, as noticed in *Henry von Ofterdingen*.
14. MacDonald says, “One of the most wonderful faculties of the true poet was the power of taking up some old thing, and making it not only new, but making it ten times more valuable than it was before.” See Barbara Amell, “MacDonald on Dante,” 8.
15. The influence of Spenser and Novalis is particularly noticeable in *Phantastes*.
16. MacDonald honors Novalis with the novel’s final words: “Our life is no dream, but it should and will perhaps become one” (252).
17. In Ignatian spirituality terms, this is a night of “consolation.” Elizabeth Robinson has noticed this aspect of *Lilith*. See Elizabeth Robinson, “*Lilith* as the Mystic’s Magnum Opus.”
18. See “Eunū’chus,” *The Oxford Companion to Classical Literature*, edited by M. C. Howatson, 3rd ed., Oxford UP, 2011, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199548545.001.0001/acref-9780199548545-e-1238>.
19. *Lilith*’s appearance in Vane’s house as a cat, “a magnificent Persian—so wet and draggled, though, as to look what she was—worse than disreputable,” (143) is another allusion to *Thais*.
20. Dante’s *Purgatorio* Canto IX gets this attention.

21. Putting Lilith to rest symbolizes the redemption of the entire train of *femme fatale* characters.
22. See Luca Bianchi, "Siger of Brabant," *Encyclopedia of the Middle Ages*, <http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780227679319.001.0001/acref-9780227679319-e-2646>.
23. As already mentioned, an image from *Purgatorio* canto IX, a menacing black eagle, is perched on top of the ebony frame.
24. See the "Lady Lilith" image on page 31.
25. Adam Walker has said, "In opposition to Locke's use of the mirror, which fixes the objects within its frame as a kind of fossilization, the Romantics used the mirror as an object which makes things come alive and represents an energetic, living world." See "Objects of Nonsense, Anarchy, and Order: Romantic Theology in Lewis Carroll's and George MacDonald's Nonsense Literature," *North Wind*, vol. 37, 2018, <https://digitalcommons.snc.edu/northwind/vol37/iss1/2>.
26. Vane's misstep seems to hearken back to his earlier soliloquy: "The part of the philanthropist is indeed a dangerous one; and the man who would do his neighbor good must first study how not to do him evil, and must begin by pulling the beam out of his own eye" (71).
27. The friendship is not surprising, as the two polymaths shared much in common: "a love of nature, a touch of mysticism, the rejection of Calvinism, and a Scottish heritage." See William Raeper, *George MacDonald*, 216.
28. Augustine describes Vane's error. He says, "the mind is also subject to a certain propensity [sic] to use the sense of the body, not for self-indulgence of a physical kind, but for the satisfaction of its own inquisitiveness. This futile curiosity masquerades under the name of science and learning . . ." See *Confessions*, 107.
29. Vane will later reflect back and say, "So long as exist men and women of unwholesome mind, that lake will still be peopled with loathsomeness" (244).
30. "When Israel went forth from Egypt" (Ps. 114:1).
31. MacDonald's favorite English translation of the *Commedia* is by E. H. Plumptre. See Barbara Amell, "MacDonald on Dante," *Wingfold*, no. 49, Winter 2005, 8. Plumptre makes an important note of this passage from *Purgatorio* IX.76-106. He says, "The white marble, in which he saw himself mirrored, indicates the self-knowledge, without which contrition is incomplete, the purity of conscience which can recall the memories

of past sin's without fresh guilt. The dark gloomy hue, the broken and rough surface of the second stair, symbolize the state of the heart as laid bare in confession, in all its black unrighteousness. The crimson hue of the porphyry is, in like manner, the fit emblem of the charity which is the spring of all true works of satisfaction, possibly also of the 'blood of price' shed upon the cross ; blood which was thought of partly as an expiation for the sins of the world, partly as the outward token of a burning and consuming love. Lastly, the adamant—not diamond—threshold upon which the angel was seated, represents at once the rock foundation of the Church's power to pardon, and the firmness of soul required in the confessor who is the instrument by which that power is exercised." Vane mentions "three or four great steps of a stair" leading up to a "grand old chair" (250). This note by Plumtre speaks of the threshold as a final stair added to the three approaching stairs, explaining why Vane would describe the approach as "three or four" stairs (250). See Dante, *The Divine Commedia and Canzonere V2*, translated by E. H. Plumtre, 1899, repr., Kessinger Publishing, 2006.

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