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George MacDonald's *Lilith* as Mystical Document

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Abstract:

In this paper I argue for the interpretation of MacDonald's fantasy novel *Lilith* as an artistic embodiment and expression of the teachings of Christian mysticism. My primary purpose is to examine how the symbol of sleep in *Lilith* represents the role of contemplative introversion in cultivating a state of ethical rectitude, moral vision, and spiritual vitality. I discuss contemplative introversion primarily using the writings of Meister Eckhart, arguably one of the greatest mystics of the Christian tradition. I connect the symbol of sleep with the teachings of Eckhart by presenting it as an example of Carl Jung's archetypal process of rebirth in which the individual makes contact with the revitalizing powers of the unconscious through an experience of inner darkness and self surrender.

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G.K. Chesterton once wrote of George MacDonald that he would come “to be more carefully studied as a mystic...when people discover the possibility of collecting jewels scattered in a rather irregular setting” (Chesterton 13). With the help of Meister Eckhart, one of the more readily acknowledged mystics of the Christian tradition, I will attempt to do just this, focusing on MacDonald’s masterwork *Lilith*. Utilizing the insights of Meister Eckhart and connecting these insights to MacDonald’s mythic imagery with Carl Jung’s theory of the archetypes, I will show that in *Lilith*, MacDonald masterfully and powerfully presents an ethical philosophy based on man’s inner dispositional orientation to God, that is, man’s capacity for divine inspiration. I will also examine how the symbol of sleep in *Lilith* represents the role of contemplative introversion in cultivating a state of ethical rectitude, moral vision, and spiritual vitality.

Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious

Understanding the symbol of sleep is key to understanding *Lilith* as a whole. Psychologist Carl Jung’s theories of the archetypes and the collective unconscious will greatly facilitate a correct understanding of this provocative symbol. Through his extensive research, Jung found a set of recurring automatisms experienced in dreams and visionary experiences which can also be found in literature and religious myth. According to Jung there exists underneath our consciousness a deeper layer of unconscious content, things that we have forgotten or repressed. Under this layer lies the collective unconscious, which Jung says “does not develop individually but is inherited. It consists of pre-existent forms, the archetypes, which can only become conscious secondarily and which give definite form to certain psychic contents” (Jung 43). Jung claims that it is the conscious part’s relationship with the unconscious which regulates the vitality of the individual:

[I]t is the ‘nourishing’ influence of unconscious contents, which maintain the vitality of consciousness by a continual influx of energy; for consciousness does not produce its energy by itself. What is capable of transformation is just this root of consciousness, which—inconspicuous and almost invisible (i.e. unconscious) though it is—provides consciousness with all its energy. (Jung 142)

According to Jung, this unconscious is inhabited by archetypes which are “archaic or...primordial types, that is...universal images that have existed since the remotest times” (Jung 5). These archetypes of the unconscious originate from primitive man’s inherent need of them to deal with psychic events:

Primitive man...has an imperative need...to assimilate all outer experiences to inner, psychic events. It is not enough for the primitive to see the sun rise and set; this external observation must at the same time be a psychic happening...All of the mythologized

processes of nature, such as summer and winter, the phases of the moon, the rainy season, and so forth, are in no sense allegories of these objective occurrences; rather they are symbolic expressions of the inner, unconscious drama of the psyche which becomes accessible to man's consciousness by way of projection...The projection is so fundamental that it has taken several thousand years of civilization to detach it in some measure from its outer object. (Jung 6)

Perhaps Jung would say of the mystic that he or she seeks to experience consciously an as yet unconscious transcendental level of reality in order to bring the richness of the unconscious to the conscious personality.

Jung got most of his data on archetypes not only from reports of visionary experiences and dreams, but also from myths and fairy tales, which he considered to be prime sources of projected unconscious content (Jung 5). *Lilith* is just such a source, being a hybrid of myth and fairy tale. We know from his son Greville that MacDonald wrote the first draft of *Lilith* in a wild frenzy of inspiration:

The way in which my father first wrote *Lilith* in 1890 is important. He was possessed by a feeling...that it was a mandate direct from God, for which he himself was to find form and clothing; and he set about its transcription in tranquility. Its first writing is unlike anything else he ever did. It runs from page to page, with few breaks into new paragraphs, with little punctuation, with scarcely a word altered, and in a handwriting freer perhaps than most of his, yet with the same beautiful legibility. The mandate thus embodied symbolic forms, over which he did not ponder... (Gr. MacDonald 548)

Such a creative process lends itself perfectly to the play of what Jung would call the collective unconscious. MacDonald scholar Edmund Cusick has already applied Jung's archetypes of the Shadow and the Anima to MacDonald's fantasy work. In his essay "MacDonald and Jung," Cusick explains Jung's views on literature with great clarity:

Jung divides literature into two categories. The first of these he terms 'psychological'. This accounts for almost all literature, both popular and literary...The other class of literature is the 'visionary', represented by only a handful of literary works, yet amongst them are some of outstanding genius, notably Dante's *Inferno*, Blake's poetry and the second part of Goethe's *Faust*. These works are generated by the emergence of material from the collective unconscious. (Cusick 63-64)

As Cusick goes on to write, “Jung’s remarks on visionary art seem to describe *Lilith*” (64). Cusick validates this claim using Jung’s own words directly after this statement in which Jung describes the visionary art in detail:

...it is a vision ‘as seen in a glass, darkly’. It is nothing but a tremendous intuition striving for expression. It is like a whirlwind that seizes everything within reach and assumes visible form as it swirls upward...The poet must have at his disposal a huge store of material if he is to communicate even a fraction of what he has glimpsed, and must make use of difficult and contradictory images in order to express the strange paradoxes of his vision. (qtd. in Cusick 65)

Cusick goes on to point out that in *Lilith*, MacDonald draws images from the Old Testament, the Kabbalah, pagan myth, and European fairy tale. From what we know of MacDonald’s writing process, the dream-like narrative of the book, and the use of archetypal and mythological symbols, it seems that *Lilith* must belong to the visionary class of literature.

The Archetype of Rebirth

In Jung’s essay on the archetype of rebirth, he examines symbols used in myth and fairy tale that symbolize the psychological process of spiritual renewal and transformation which he calls rebirth. Although I am not aware of any evidence that Jung read *Lilith*, he does examine the symbol of sleep as a symbol of psychological rebirth in a passage from the Koran. In this story, entitled “The Cave,” seven men sleep in a cave for 309 years. Jung says that “[t]he cave is the place of rebirth, that secret cavity in which one is shut up in order to be incubated and renewed. The Koran says of it: ‘You might have seen the rising sun decline to the right of their cavern, and as it set, go past them on the left, while they [the Seven Sleepers] stayed in the middle.’ The ‘middle’ is the centre where the jewel reposes, where the incubation or the sacrificial rite or the transformation takes place” (Jung 135). Jung interprets this passage as symbolizing spiritual rebirth:

Anyone who gets into that cave, that is to say into the cave which everyone has in himself, or into the darkness that lies behind consciousness, will find himself involved in an—at first—unconscious process of transformation. By penetrating into the unconscious he makes a connection with his unconscious contents...Those seven sleepers indicate by their sacred number that they are gods, who are transformed during sleep and thereby enjoy eternal youth...The repristination of the original state is tantamount to attaining once more the freshness of youth. (Jung 136)

Jung’s use of the archetype of rebirth to explain the symbol of sleep in this story from the Koran sheds light on MacDonald’s use of this universal symbol. To grow into his destiny of

wholeness and vitality, Vane must make contact with the unconscious and utilize its rejuvenating powers.

The Archetype of the Wise Old Man

Mr. Vane's primary guide in his journey is Mr. Raven. Mr. Raven seems to know everything, but Vane will not make use of his knowledge. Mr. Raven asks Vane the questions he needs to be asked in order to become aware of his own ignorance and spiritual indigence. He tells him what he must do and persists in this until Vane obeys. Interpreted as Jung's "wise old man" archetype, Mr. Raven would be Vane's own wiser, higher personality projected out of consciousness as an autonomous personality. Mr. Raven matches Jung's descriptions of the "wise old man" archetype almost perfectly: "[i]t is the figure of a 'wise old man' who symbolizes the spiritual factor. Sometimes the part is played by a 'real' spirit, namely the ghost of one dead, or, more rarely, by grotesque gnomelike figures or talking animals" (Jung 215). Not only is Mr. Raven known in Vane's home as the ghost of the old librarian, but he is a shape-shifting, half bird, half man figure. According to Jung, the significance of the animal quality of the old man archetype is that he is, to an extent, outside the human experience.

[T]he animal form shows that the contents and functions in question are still in the extrahuman sphere, i.e., on a plane beyond human consciousness, and consequently have a share on the one hand in the daemonically superhuman and on the other in the bestially subhuman. Although the old man has, up to now, looked and behaved more or less like a human being, his magical powers and his spiritual superiority suggest that, in good and bad alike, he is outside, or above, or below the human level. (Jung 230)

We know that Mr. Raven has already slept the sleep that Vane must sleep. Because of this his will is able to effortlessly fulfill "the will that actuates it" i.e. God. Perhaps, psychologically speaking, Mr. Raven represents the part of Vane's as yet unconscious self which is in perfect harmony with his source. For, as Jung writes, "[M]an's worst sin is unconsciousness" (253). Vane must expand and deepen his consciousness through his encounters with and integration of the archetypes of his unconscious and finally through the archetypal process of rebirth through sleeping in Mr. Raven's chamber.

Jung further describes the wise old man archetype as morally ambiguous: "It can never be established with one-hundred percent certainty whether the [wise old man figures] are morally good. Very often they show all the signs of duplicity, if not of outright malice" (215). It appears this way to the individual because "the grand plan on which the unconscious life of the psyche is constructed is so inaccessible to our understanding that we can never know what evil may not be necessary in order to produce good by enantiodromia, and what good may very possibly lead to evil" (Jung 215). Mr. Raven's advice to Vane at first seems ludicrous. Vane takes him for a mad man. Vane is unable to understand why he must sleep in Mr. Raven's icy cold chamber of death. Later in the book, Mr. Raven again tells Vane that he must sleep even though it seems to

Vane that he must help the Little Ones. Mr. Raven tells Vane that he will do no good, only harm, until he sleeps the sleep (MacDonald, *Lilith* 158).

The primary function of the wise old man archetype is to guide and advise the individual. The individual must integrate the wisdom personified in the archetype into his consciousness. Jung further elaborates on the function of the wise old man as guide:

The old man always appears when the hero is in a hopeless and desperate situation from which only profound reflection or a lucky idea—in other words, a spiritual function or an endopsychic automatism of some kind—can extricate him. But since, for internal and external reasons, the hero cannot accomplish this himself, the knowledge needed to compensate the deficiency comes in the form of a personified thought, i.e., in the shape of this sagacious and helpful old man. (Jung 217-218)

Mr. Raven begins his acquaintance with Vane by asking him who he is:

“Tell me, then, who you are--if you happen to know.”

“How should I help knowing? I am myself, and must know!”

“If you know you are yourself, you know that you are not somebody else; but do you know that you are yourself? Are you sure you are not your own father?--or, excuse me, your own fool?--Who are you, pray?” (MacDonald, *Lilith* 14)

This passage seems to be exactly what Jung was writing about in another description of the wise old man: “Often the old man in fairytales asks questions like who? why? whence? And whither? For the purpose of inducing self-reflection and mobilizing the moral forces...” (220). In one example that Jung gives from another fairy tale, the old man even encourages the hero to sleep, just as Mr. Raven advises Vane: “The tendency of the old man to set one thinking also takes the form of urging people to ‘sleep on it.’ Thus he says to the girl who is searching for her lost brothers: ‘Lie down. Morning is cleverer than evening’” (220-221). Jung gives this as one of many examples. Through Jung’s broad research of dreams, myth, religion, and folk lore, he presents a convincing argument for sleep being a universal symbol of spiritual rebirth. The archetype of the wise old man is directly related to the archetype of rebirth in that the wise old man guides the hero to an experience of rebirth in which the wisdom and vitality of the unconscious are accessed. The archetype of rebirth, often symbolized by a descent into the darkness of a cave or an abyss, as well as through the unconsciousness of sleep, is a metaphor for the practice of contemplative introversion, leading to an experience of pure disinterest which the medieval German mystic Meister Eckhart wrote so extensively on.

Eckhart's Disinterest

MacDonald's sublime, stirring images wake us up to the deeper reality of bliss calling to us from the unknown depths of our being, drawing our attention to the activity within us going on below the mundane and often trivial aims of our day to day conscious life. If these images do indeed come from what Jung calls the collective unconscious, then their importance lies in the parallel psychic processes which they symbolize. The mystics of the world's great religions speak technically of what MacDonald expresses through his subtle and powerful language of myth. They give us the technical guidance to take on the dauntingly obscure yet inexorably imperative task of answering the call of that which is deepest and holiest in us.

The Medieval German mystic Meister Eckhart is perhaps our best guide to understanding what the sleep is and how one sleeps. To sleep, Eckhart would perhaps say, is to have perfect "Abgeschiedenheit", usually translated as detachment or disinterest. According to Eckhart, perfect disinterest is the perfect poverty of spirit needed to become one with the source of our life, which he calls God.

I have often said, and great authorities agree, that to be a proper abode for God and fit for God to act in, a man should also be free from all [his own] things and [his own] actions, both inwardly and outwardly...For God does not intend that man shall have a place reserved for him to work in, since true poverty of spirit requires that man shall be emptied of god and all his works, so that if God wants to act in the soul, he himself must be the place in which he acts—and that he would like to do. (Eckhart 230, 231)

Eckhart praises disinterest even above love.

The best thing about love is that it makes me love God. Now, it is much more advantageous for me to move God toward myself than for me to move toward him...He is more able to deal with me and join me than I am to join him. Disinterest brings God to me and I can demonstrate it this way: Everything likes its own habitat best; God's habitat is purity and unity, which are due to disinterest. Therefore God necessarily gives himself to the disinterested heart. (Eckhart 82)

This is what Mrs. Raven means when she tells Vane that he must sleep "heartedly, altogether and outright," to the extent that he would not even trouble himself about waking. Although it must feel like the death of oneself to practice such a complete disinterest, it is a deep hunger for life which leads one to it. Joseph Campbell expresses this brilliantly in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*:

Willed introversion, in fact, is one of the classic implements of creative genius and can be employed as a deliberate device. It drives the psychic energies into depth and activates the lost continent of unconscious infantile and archetypal images...it is a

deliberate, terrific refusal to respond to anything but the deepest, highest, richest answer to the as yet unknown demand of some waiting void within: a kind of total strike, or rejection of the offered terms of life, as a result of which some power of transformation carries the problem to a plane of new magnitudes, where it is suddenly and finally resolved. (Campbell 64, 65)

This practice is not to be confused with a total detachment for its own sake in which one uses psychological techniques to avoid dealing with life; rather it is the disciplined technique of silencing the lesser desires that the deeper, richer desires will surface in their stead. In actuality, through this practice of disinterest and desirelessness, Eckhart writes, “the soul is unified, knowledge is made pure, the heart is kindled, the spirit awakened, the desires quickened, the virtues enhanced” (Eckhart 93). We practice this in our daily lives when we refuse to respond to or engage in outside stimulus or our own emotional activity that fails to invite us to live in our deepest, richest state of being. It is the rejecting of lesser lovers for our true love, remaining loyal even in his or her absence. It is persevering through what St. John of the Cross calls the Dark Night of the Soul when all feelings and ideas of God which the soul previously received such profound intimations of God through are dried up and darkened, leaving only a painful emptiness. In this Dark Night the soul must stay true to God, which it now only recognizes as that which will completely and utterly fill the deep void.

Again and again in his writings Eckhart emphasizes the infinite extent of the sleep of disinterest, in which “...when disinterest reaches its apex it will be unaware of its knowledge, it will not love its own love, and will be in the dark about its own light” (Eckhart 89). It is indeed a total and complete act of self negation leading to a complete revitalization of the true self in God, which necessarily puts at least the total act of sleep beyond the reach of human volition. Just as one is not truly asleep physically if one is conscious that one is sleeping or is actively maintaining a state of sleep, so also is one not fully disinterested if there remains a spark of self consciousness or calculated intention. One can begin to think about these experiences on the edges of them, that is, as one comes down from the high. One can also remember them afterwards, but in a perfect experience of union any awareness of the experience is absent. This is why Vane could not choose to sleep even when he wanted to; however, his willingness to sleep is the first step to fully sleeping. One can and must be willing to be fully disinterested, but one cannot make it happen all of a sudden. It can be encouraged and worked toward, but not achieved. Contemplative Psychologist Gerald May uses the words of St. John of the Cross to emphasize the role of grace in the process:

Saint John of the Cross [refers to] the entire spiritual life as well as meditation when he says, ‘In order to arrive at being everything, desire to be nothing. In order to arrive at knowing everything, desire to know nothing.’ This is one of the most important themes in contemplative spirituality: the notion that you cannot do it, you cannot make it happen, you cannot achieve it...though we may incline ourselves in the direction of such experiences, it is impossible to make them happen. (May 37)

Vane's greedy desire for sleep is only another aspect of his willfulness keeping him from sleeping completely. It seems that it is primarily a passive process which Vane must merely cultivate a willingness to undergo.

Ethical Implications

MacDonald's vision of human development as presented in *Lilith* has some important ethical implications. Vane's journey is plagued with moral ambiguity. He knows that there is evil, and he knows that there is good, but he does not know what actions lead to what outcomes. He tries to help the Little Ones but only does them harm by setting a poor example for them by letting himself be dominated by the Bags and by unknowingly saving the life of their greatest enemy, Lilith. According to Mr. Raven, Vane makes these mistakes because of the one real mistake he made before, namely, his refusal to sleep the sleep.

By the second time Mr. Raven tries to persuade Vane to sleep, Vane has passed through many humbling adventures in which his ignorance and spiritual bankruptcy has been made clearer to him. When Vane learns that the Little Ones are in danger of being harmed by Lilith as a result of his own folly, he begs Mr. Raven to let him go to help them, but Mr. Raven says that he will do no good, only harm, unless he first sleeps. He tells Vane that, "[T]he fact is, no man understands anything; when he knows he does not understand, that is his first tottering step--not toward understanding, but toward the capability of one day understanding" (MacDonald, *Lilith* 152). Even though Vane has been humbled by his experiences since his last meeting with Mr. Raven, his anxiousness to help the Little Ones makes him reluctant to sleep: "But surely sleep is not the first thing! Surely, surely, action takes precedence of repose!"; however, Mr. Raven answers him, "A man can do nothing he is not fit to do" (MacDonald, *Lilith* 154). When Vane is unable to correctly decipher the outcome of a fight between the cat forms of Lilith and Mara, Raven asks him "How should such eyes tell who have never slept?" (MacDonald, *Lilith* 154). When Vane persists in contradicting Mr. Raven in his insistence of him to sleep, Mr. Raven points out Vane's folly in believing himself alive when he is indeed dead and refusal to remedy it, and maintains that all of his subsequent follies were the result of his original refusal to sleep. Mr. Raven gently chastens Vane, saying "...You will be dead, so long as you refuse to die...Be persuaded, and go home with me...The most--nearly the only foolish thing you ever did, was to run from our dead?" (MacDonald, *Lilith*, 155). Vane lacks the moral vision necessary for truly helpful, dynamic action. His consciousness is too out of touch with the unconscious powers which are the foundation of his life. His conscious personality will only be capable of correct moral action when it is rejuvenated and vivified by an experience of rebirth in which the wisdom and vitality of the unconscious will be assimilated into his conscious individuality, a process Jung calls individuation. One archetypal character, Mara, the lady of wisdom gained through sorrow, tells Vane, "Your real name, indeed, is written on your forehead, but at present it whirls about so irregularly that nobody can read it. I will do my part to steady it. Soon it will go slower, and I hope, settle at last" (MacDonald, *Lilith* 74). Vane's true self founded in God will only begin to arise when he puts to death the superficial self and its misguided aims. He neither knows himself nor the basis of his actions. They are not based on a true perception of reality. His actions are not grounded in God.

When Vane does begin to sleep he describes it thus: "I grew continuously less conscious of myself, continuously more conscious of bliss, unimaginable yet felt. I had neither made it nor prayed for it: it was mine in virtue of existence; and existence was mine in virtue of a Will that

dwelt in mine” (MacDonald, *Lilith* 230). In this passage we see Vane making contact with the foundation of his life and moral authority. It is only through the willed contemplative introversion previously elaborated on that Vane can make this contact, and it is only by means of this connection that he can act morally. The kind of ideal moral action that comes from such a union with what MacDonald and Eckhart would call God and what Jung and Campbell might call the powers of the unconscious is spontaneous, uncontrived, naturally flowing activity which need not be checked by rational judgment. Because Vane has been purified through rebirth, he is able to become a vessel of the dynamic power of God. Eckhart describes a similar situation: “As the soul becomes more pure and bare and poor, and possesses less of created things, and is emptier of all things that are not God, it receives God more purely and is more totally in him and it truly becomes one with God” (Eckhart 642). In such a state, Eckhart says, “all creatures are pure to enjoy; for it enjoyeth all creatures in God, and God in all creatures” (Eckhart 647). Eckhart acknowledges that it is only God that gives him the power to love perfectly, just as Paul affirms when in Galatians 2:20 he writes: “...it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me.” The practice of detachment is what gives one the ability to love perfectly, which is why Eckhart regards it as even more important than love. Without absolute detachment there is no perfection of love. It is only in an experience of unity that one can act perfectly ethically. It is intention that determines the rightness or wrongness of an action, and in a state of unity one’s intention is free from any taint of selfishness or egotism.

Conclusion

In order to revive his inner life, Vane must metaphorically die the death inherent in an experience of pure disinterest, abandoning all thoughts of self, all concepts, all desires. He must sleep “heartily and outright,” the ultimate goal being a constant state of receptivity toward God. His salvation is achieved only when his will is one with God’s in perfect union. This state of ethical rectitude and spiritual vitality maintained by a constant receptivity toward God, or as Jung would say, the powers of the unconscious, is what Mr. Vane’s final act of self surrender in sleep will yield.

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