“Whence Came the Fantasia?”: The Good Dream in George MacDonald’s *Lilith*

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When a man dreams his own dream, he is the sport of his dream; when Another gives it to him, that Other is able to fulfill it.” George MacDonald writes this statement near the end of *Lilith*, the fantasy for adults which he published in 1895, and which he intended as his masterpiece. He is using the term “dreams” in the sense of imaginative fantasizing of the deepest longings of the soul after an indescribable something—after the Infinite; longings that nothing on earth can satisfy. This deep desire is not unlike what Plato referred to as “eros,” and what certain German writers identify by the term “Sehnsucht.” The ultimate value of expressing these human longings in fantasy is a subject that, concerned MacDonald throughout his long career. Some people long for inferior and indeed unadmirable things; fantasizing often concerns itself with such. Other people hunger and thirst after righteousness and truth. Is the difference to be accounted for in merely subjective and solipsistic terms, or is the issue one with eternal implications and consequences? Life seems continually to offer satisfactions which continually disappoint, and as a result a person either dreams the more, or he becomes sceptical about the ultimate value of fantasizing.

In his *Diary of an Old Soul*, a long meditative poem containing a stanza for every day of the calendar year, MacDonald writes, a prayer for April 2: [end of page 27]

Some things wilt thou not one day turn to dreams?
Some dreams wilt thou not one day turn to fact?
The thing that painful, more than should be, seems,
Shall not thy sliding years with them retract—
Shall fair realities not counteract?
The thing that was well dreamed of bliss and joy—
Wilt thou not breathe life into the toy?

We expect MacDonald to look to God for an answer to every question that troubled him, and to shape an answer in terms of his religious faith. The thought of this stanza is that one day an interchange will take place between the painful realities of this life and the blissful fantasizings of the imagination that longs for truth, the former becoming like bad dreams that are forgotten,
and the latter assuming a reality more intense than anything we now know. The thought at the conclusion of Lilith is not unlike this: the day will come when all painful experiences will have served their purposes and will be no more, and realities of unspeakable glory will take their place.

In his theology MacDonald had laid the foundation for his hope of an unspeakably glorious future for mankind in worlds to come, a hope which he expresses compellingly in his expository writings. But to express his hope in fantasy seemed to him so much more appropriate to its content. What was moving him so deeply, and had been present to motivate him throughout his long life, was itself a dream present to his imagination—not simply a set of principles held by his intellect alone, as with the rationalist theologian. The power of imaginative expression seemed necessary to its presentation. Is it possible to see reasons in the very nature of things for this apparently over-riding authority of the imagination, and thereby to establish a claim for the truth of certain visions? MacDonald saw this possibility as strong and exciting, and in Lilith he undertakes to give it the most convincing expression that he can. [28]

MacDonald’s view of human nature is the cornerstone in his thought for establishing the authority of dreams. He held that humans differ from God only in the quality and degree of their beings, not in their essence. The highest fantasies of good men spring, therefore, from their deepest longings toward purer being in God himself. MacDonald’s thought, farther than accepting and building upon the Augustinian doctrine that God created man and the world out of nothing — ‘ex nihilo’ (a doctrine which many orthodox theologians accept)—proposes instead that God created all things out of his own endless glory; that is, they emanate directly from himself. He writes, for instance, in Chapter XXXV of his novel Weighed and Wanting: “I repent me of the ignorance wherein I ever said that God made man out of nothing: there is no nothing out of which to make anything: God is all in all, and he ‘made us out of himself.” Also, Mr Raven in Chapter XXIX of Lilith speaks of the time “. . . when God created me—not out of Nothing, as say the unwise, but out of his own endless glory . . .” Hence, the essential person—what MacDonald earlier in Lilith identifies as the true self among the many false selves within each person—is of like substance with God himself.

But man is created free, and entertains illusions of his own independence. These attitudes of self-sufficiency and self-importance, what MacDonald calls our false or animal selves, must be overcome and annihilated, a task which the true or godlike self within each individual must
address. Each person is, therefore, fighting a spiritual battle within, and, depending upon which self is the stronger, is either growing in his essential humanity into fuller Godlikeness, or he is descending on the continuum of being, with his sense of independence growing and all its attendant attitudes flourishing: selfishness, pride, greed and so forth. The quality of a given person’s imaginative visions reveals the self that is in control of his being.

No matter which self is in control of a person’s being, however, all people’s thoughts are given to them by God. To speak of some men dreaming their own dreams while others dream the dream God has given them, is true only in a certain limited sense. God is immanent in the mental processes of all people, and gives to all people their thoughts. In his essay on the imagination in the volume entitled *Orts* MacDonald writes:

> If we now consider the so-called creative faculty in man, we shall find that in no primary sense is this faculty creative. Indeed, a man is rather being thought than thinking, when a new thought arises in his mind. He knew it not till he found it there, therefore he could not even have sent for it. He did not create it, else how could it be the surprise that it was when it arose?

He sees an argument in the very novel character of thought processes that they come from God, inasmuch as our very beings depend upon God’s constantly thinking us. To quote Psalm 100: “It is he that hath made us, and not we ourselves.” MacDonald see this principle as having an existential reality: God is constantly making people. And because man is being made in the Image of God, and all his faculties have their counterpart in God, that faculty which, MacDonald says, gives form to thought—his imagination—is made in the image of the imagination of God. MacDonald is building here upon the thought of Coleridge, and one recalls the latter’s definition of the imagination, that it is a “repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM.” In *The Diary of an Old Soul* for August 27 we read:

> For our Imagination is, in small,  
> And with the making-difference that must be  
> Mirror of God’s creating mirror; all  
> That shows itself therein, that formeth he . . .

Thus it would appear that MacDonald felt that a person’s thoughts are sent him directly from God, and that what he calls the forms of those thoughts, or their imaginative depictions, come indirectly from God, inasmuch as God has
created all the phenomena from which those forms are derived.

This view of God’s relation to our thought processes may at first seem to be strongly fatalistic, in that we may appear to be passive instruments of divine activity. But not so. MacDonald insists throughout his writing that the will of man is free. We are creatures who make free choices, and within each choice is a moral component. God grants to all persons thoughts and dreams that are appropriate to the moral quality of their choices. Morally undesirable choices are said to issue from an individual’s inferior selves. The thoughts and dreams granted to a man possessed by these lower selves do not square with ultimate reality. They rather have behind them the divine intention of revealing the insufficiency and inadequacy of all who suppose themselves independent and self-sustaining. Mr Raven tells Mr Vane near the beginning of *Lilith*: “... indeed the business of the universe is to make such a fool of you that you will know yourself for one, and so begin to be wise!” MacDonald is interpreting this principle in terms of God’s over-riding mercy and grace. When people finally come to the end of themselves and see how foolish all their treasured conclusions are, they may turn to God and begin to be wise, as does *Lilith* in our fantasy.

But while base men are given base dreams, is the converse not true, that good men are given good and valid dreams? MacDonald was much concerned whether he himself was spiritually mature enough to be given truly valid dreams. In *The Diary of an Old Soul* for June 28 he prays:

Lord, set me from self-inspiration free,
And let me live and think from thee, not me—
Rather, from deepest me then think and feel,
At centre of thought’s swift-revolving wheel.

“Self-inspiration” is the constant threat that fallen man faces. Everything depends upon whether the “deepest me”—that is, the divine self—is in the ascendancy in him. If it is, his dreams will be true harbingers of divine realities. His desires after God must be pure and strong, and his moral life characterised by a childlike trust in God and obedience to his precepts. To such people God grants dreams whose fulfillment will beggar their character, no matter how grand. For it is impossible that the true and mature imagination be able to conceive of something more grand or glorious than God is himself able, to bring to fulfillment. Again, in his *Diary* for August 28 MacDonald writes:

I clasp thy feet, O father of the living!
Thou wilt not let my fluttering hopes be more
Or lovelier, or greater than thy giving!
Surely thy ships will bring to my poor shore.
Of gold and peacocks such a shining store
As will laugh all the dreams to holy scorn,
Of love and sorrow that were ever born.

The tone of supplication that is here evident, in which MacDonald expresses a fervent hope that what he is saying is true (rather than insisting upon its truth) is typical of his writings. He is invariably honest concerning his underlying uncertainties, without which faith is not faith. Another way of stating it, perhaps, is to say that MacDonald’s deepest longing is that the deepest longings of true men be true. These dreams are, therefore, a means of highest worship and of strongest witness. Not only so, but to cultivate them is a prime means of strengthening the essential “I” within, the self whose nature is divine. All [32] these ideas are of considerable help to us in our understanding of 

Mr Vane, the protagonist of 

Lilith, learns of the existence of a higher world while in his library, and enters it through a mirror in his garret. There he meets Mr Raven, or Adam, the mysterious man-bird who is Vane’s teacher throughout the fantasy, and who tells him he has found his way into the “region of seven dimensions,” a realm of palpable reality coincident with that of the world from which he has come. The only doors into this reality are “doors in,” he is told; that is, one must go through himself, by means of his imagination. A certain type of book, for instance, may be such a door, in that it arouses the imagination. The mirror through which Vane first entered this world suggests the imagination; one is reminded of the metaphor of the imagination as mirror in the above quotation from the Diary. But MacDonald stresses in the beginning of Lilith that the reality of this realm is a higher reality than that of the mundane world, and that entering it is but a prelude to entering yet higher realms. “I tell you, there are more worlds, and more doors to them, than you will think of in many years,” Mr Raven explains. The ultimate issue for MacDonald, as he writes all this, is whether such realms are only imagined, with no reality beyond the subjective, or whether one may be confident such imaginative experiences in some sense portend the truly real that all men encounter beyond death.

Within the higher world of fantasy land, Vane meets Lilith, who, according to the medieval Jewish legend MacDonald follows rather closely, is Adam’s first wife who became evil through her pride in having given birth
to a child, and [33] whose life has been a long career in selfish acquisition and tyranny over the lives of others. The fantasy shows the long process whereby the evil in Lilith is overcome, a process in which dreams play an important part. Captured by the army of Vane’s allies, she is taken to the house of Mara, who symbolises the adversities and sorrows in life that are calculated by God to lead people to repentance and faith.

As Mara attempts kindly but firmly to persuade Lilith to “turn away from the wicked things” she has been doing, Lilith retorts: “I will not. I will be myself and not another,” to which Mara replies: “Alas, you are another now, not yourself! Will you not be your real self? . . . You do not know it: your nature is good, and you do evil.” This suggests that all beings, no matter how evil, have an essential nature that is good. Next, Lilith is afforded the horrific experience of seeing a vision of the being she has made herself to be, in contrast with that being which God had originally intended her to be. As a result she submits to the severing of her hand; she is separated from her acquisitive, greedy nature. She then sleeps the sanctifying sleep in Eve’s charnel house. All this is necessary to bring about the annihilation of all her false selves, that her real self may emerge. It may been seen as a rather elaborate depiction of the Christian teaching of the need for dying into life.

Vane and all the other characters, except the primal Adam and Eve, also succumb to sleep. Vane experiences numerous dreams, and ponders their truth. Terrified in his loneliness, he encounters Adam and questions him as to the import of his dreams. Adam instructs him:

> When you are quite dead, you will dream no false dream. The soul that is true can generate nothing that is not true, neither can the false enter it . . . Thou doubtest because thou lovest the truth . . . The [34] hour will come, and that ere long, when, being true, thou shalt behold the very truth, and doubt will be forever dead . . . Thou wilt then know that which thou, canst not now dream. Thou hast not yet looked the Truth in the face, hast as yet at best but seen him through a cloud. That which thou seest not, and never didst see save in a glass darkly—that which, indeed, never can be known save by its innate splendour shining straight into pure eyes—that thou canst not but doubt, and art blameless in doubting until thou seest it face to face . . . Trials yet await thee . . . Remember the things thou hast seen. Truly thou knowest not those things, but thou knowest what they have seemed, what they have meant to thee! . . .
Truth is all in all; and the truth of things lies, at once hid and revealed; in their seeming.

The central concern here is a moral one, between dreams that are completely true and dreams that, although they may appear to be true, only adumbrate truth. The truer the soul grows, the greater quantity of truth its dreams will contain; it must be completely true itself before it can receive pure truth, a state it never reaches in this life. Vane’s questioning the reality of his dreams reveals his desire for visions of more substantial reality, of purer truth. They will come, he is told; meanwhile, he is to heed the meanings that his present dreams seem to contain. These meanings are true for him in his present state; that is, they fit his present spiritual need. Apparently, in MacDonald’s economy, one’s dreams function very similarly to the outer events that befall one: “That which is within a man, not that which lies beyond his vision, is the main factor in what is about to befall him: the operation upon him is the event,” we read at the beginning of Chapter XVI. Truth is functional: whatever ministers to one’s present state of becoming a better person will seem to him at the time to be true, simply because of the relation it bears to his spiritual progress.

As one studies MacDonald’s writings, he cannot help but note that certain contemporary intellectual trends that disturbed many in his day, in that they seemed to offer a challenge to the truth of the Christian faith, not only did not disturb him, but actually are absorbed into his thought in such a way as to achieve a certain accommodation with his basic convictions. Darwinism is a case in point: he implies in his writings that physical evolution may well be a counterpart to spiritual development. In the material before us, one may see him responding to the contention becoming current in his day that truth is relative, that what is true for one man may not be true for another. MacDonald suggests that truth has both its absolute and its seemingly relative aspects. Truth is incarnational, not propositional; therefore the quality of one’s encounters with it depends upon one’s spiritual state and perception, not upon the keeness of one’s intellect. The God of love (MacDonald is fond of saying) who loved all men into being, and who is loving each of them towards spiritual maturity as complete sons of God, governs the nature of each encounter to give what an individual then needs, though the perception itself may stand as far from the Absolute Truth as an orchid seed stands from the glory of its later bloom. Indeed, no one in this life is afforded anything like a full disclosure of the truth. When a person has finally attained to his maturity in a world to come, God will grant him to
encounter—to see and know—Absolute Truth, the glory of God as he is. In the chapter entitled “The Journey Home,” the characters who have awakened from their sleep are seen travelling towards such an encounter. They are going “home to the Father” through terrain that is communicating to them larger portions of the truth than they formerly—in low spiritual states—could receive. Vane muses: [36]

A wondrous change had passed upon the world—or was it not rather that a change more marvellous had taken place in us?

Later, he observes:

The river grew lovelier and lovelier, until I knew that never before had I seen real water. Nothing in this world is more than like it.

And, in another place:

Every growing thing showed me, by its shape and colour, its indwelling idea—the informing thought, that is, which was its being and sent it out.

Things themselves have not changed; the truths they now are seen to reveal have always been latent in them. But the sacramental process—in which all of nature is a vehicle of grace—is operating and thriving much more successfully than it previously did when the characters were under the sway of their, inferior selves, before they slept the sanctifying sleep.

At this juncture the reader feels he can safely predict the conclusion: the party shall arrive “home,” and the value of fantasizing shall be affirmed. But MacDonald surprises us: he avoids depicting his characters as achieving their goal, the vision of Ultimate Truth. The reader has been anticipating that they will arrive at a state of final wholeness and confront the reality of God, but he is disappointed. Perhaps MacDonald felt unable to depict an essentially static scene without its being, by comparison to its anticipation, flat. The imagination of man in this world feeds exclusively upon constant change, and therefore lacks resources to depict convincingly that which is beyond the reaches of its experience. So MacDonald chose to close the fantasy dynamically, drawing upon the suggestive power of anticipation and possibility, amid the continuing process of becoming, by returning Vane to his [37] library, still in a state of expectation.

The spectre of an imaginatively flat conclusion, however, is not the only problem MacDonald faces and attempts to resolve as he concludes Lilith. He chooses to address as well the more philosophical question, namely, whether, pleasant as all this has been, it is not all empty dreaming. To
answer this objection he begins with an appeal to the basic veracity of God: surely God will not deceive man by allowing the deepest longings of good men to come to naught. “Can it be that the last waking also was a dream?” Vane asks, and then concludes:

If that, waking was itself but a dream, surely it was a dream of a better waking yet to come, and I have not been the sport of a false vision. Such a dream must have yet lovelier truth at the heart of its dreaming . . . Whence came the fantasia? and whence the life that danced thereto? Didst thou say, in the dark of thy own unconscious self, “Let beauty be; let truth seem!” and straightway beauty was and truth but seemed?

MacDonald is here exhibiting his characteristic honesty and earnestness, a spirit that marks him as a literary artist rather than a cultic-minded heresiarch, who would at this point pontificate, not question. The charge that this is all pure subjectivity cannot, of course, be absolutely disproven; it can only be shown to be unlikely. So he points out that permanent and enduring truth is absent from all people’s experience, yet people long for it. In all of life, truth is more ephemeral even than beauty, yet people desire it more. If both are no more than dreams springing from the subconscious being, how is it that we do not dream a fulfilment, that fits the dream, one in which what we desire more (truth) is more, pervasively present than the beauty we desire less? The likely conclusion, MacDonald suggests, is that our longing for truth is given us by God, who is objectively real, and who withholds satisfaction now; that he may give objective satisfaction in abundance later, when we will be able to receive it. T. S. Eliot’s line in Burnt Norton “. . . human kind/ Cannot bear very much reality” has a compelling application to what MacDonald is suggesting.

There seems to be in all this, then, a strong mandate for the moral imagination to fantasize its deepest longings and highest desires. But one is unexpectedly given pause by the final paragraphs of Lilith, in which Vane resolves to fantasize no more. He concludes: “I have never again sought the mirror. The hand sent me back: I will not go out again by that door!” And then he quotes from the Book Of Job: ““All the days of my appointed time will I wait till my change come.”” Robert Lee Wolff, in his The Golden Key, a heavily speculative Freudian interpretation of MacDonald’s writings, sees in this passage sufficient evidence to argue that MacDonald came at the end of his life to be disillusioned with his entire system of thought. Some other students of MacDonald’s works, leaning heavily on Wolff’s speculations,
have come to similar conclusions. But an alternative interpretation of our passage is not only possible but quite plausible and appreciably more in accord with the tenor of MacDonald’s thought over a lifetime.

One must keep in mind that Mr Vane, who has been favoured with the experiences with Adam and Eve that the story records, and then has been sent back to earth, is something of an exception, in his spiritual state and knowledge, to people in general. He has attained a fuller spiritual maturity than we in this life normally attain. For him now, wisdom is to wait for the reality that is more real than dream, that he can only know in a higher world. This is here suggested by the final metaphor of waking. In comparison with this approaching reality the present life itself is but a dream. Hence the closing quotation from Novalis: “Our life is no [39] dream, but it should and will perhaps become one.” For Vane to court more of the types of dreams possible to him in this world would be for him futile. He has had the great dream and has been afforded as complete a vision as human kind can receive. It is in the very nature of dreams that to repeat them and to rationalise them is to kill them. One must allow his dreams their fleeting nature. Not to do so is not only to invite dismay, but also perhaps to invite spiritual retrogression.

The proper course of action for Vane is to wait in patience with full confidence that something more glorious than anything possible on earth is to come. So the fantasy closes with Vane’s musing: “But when I wake at last, into that life which, as a mother carries her child, carries this life in its bosom, I shall know that I wake, and shall doubt no more.” The picture that Greville MacDonald gives in his biography of his father’s final days is in full accord with this conclusion of Vane. He assumed a vigil, “a constant waiting for something at hand,” and died in peace, and confidence.

MacDonald would have his readers infer that since they have not been privileged as Vane has to see first hand something of this higher reality and then return to earth, wisdom for them is to honour their dreams and to be as perceptive concerning them as they are able. I quote again from The Diary of an Old Soul, for April 5:

The hues of dreamland, strange, and sweet and tender,  
Are but hint-shadows of’ full many a splendour  
Which the high Parent-love will yet unroll  
Before his child’s obedient, humble soul.  
Ah, me, my God!” in thee lies every bliss  
Whose shadow men go hunting warily amiss. [40]