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The Subterranean Function of Death in Milton's *Lycidas*
Griffin Gudaitis

Although there are various voices to which Milton gives individual expression in his pastoral elegy, "Lycidas", the subject matter remains consistent throughout: the death of a friend at sea, whose literary ability suggested a promising future career in poetry. The elegized Lycidas becomes identifiable with conventional symbols of the pastoral mode, namely the innocence of youth and the beauty of the natural world, a literary world wherein death would seem to have no place. But, in this paper, I argue that the death of Lycidas is not a disparate element to the poem's pastoral artifice but rather an inherent aspect of the beauty of the bereaved, the chief subject of the elegy. The opening line—"Yet once more, O ye laurels, and yet once more"—suggests that the speaker is alluding "once more" (again) to invoke a crown of "laurels" to honor a poet. At the subterranean level, however, this line contains a biblical allusion that foretells apocalypse: "Whose voice then shook the earth: but now he hath promised, saying, Yet once more I shake not the earth only, but also heaven."¹ According to Ryan Netzley, the biblical allusion at the beginning of the poem, "both in form and content, implies deferral, not imminence."² The fact that the line—"Yet once more, O ye laurels, and yet once more"—internally rhymes with itself reflects specifically at the subterranean level the coming of an event. Nevertheless, this biblical allusion raises the question of whether there is any way to avoid God's shaking of the earth and heaven.

This apocalyptic tension, which does not hint at but promises delayed loss, then injects the speaker's pastoral reminiscences of Lycidas with the opposite of idealization: the pain of his loss. The speaker invokes the muses, artistic but pagan sources of inspiration, to initiate his lament: "Begin, then, sisters of the sacred well," and he repeats, "Begin, and somewhat loudly sweep the string" (15, 17). Although the repetition of "Begin" suggests that this elegy is now starting, the two initial caesuras following "Begin" reveal the hesitation of the narrator to start and imply inefficacy on the part of the "sisters of the sacred well." The connotation of "somewhat" also calls attention to what extent, or how well, the muses are able to "sweep the string." The way in which Milton incorporates Orpheus into the poem reflects the inability of the muses to provide reason: "What could the muse herself that Orpheus bore, / The muse herself, for her enchanting son" have done (58-59)? Although "the muse herself" refers to Calliope, the mother of Orpheus, the word order suggests not that Calliope "bore" the poet but that "Orpheus bore" "the muse." The repetition of "[t]he muse herself" in the following line reinforces this idea that it is not the pagan gods who license poetic ability but Orpheus who generates it from himself. Also, the etymology of "enchanting" stems from the Latin word *incantare*, 'to enchant' or put something under a spell. This structure calls into question whether Calliope searches "for her enchanting son" or, inversely, her son enchants (invokes) her.

The scope of paganism in the poem to account is severely limited so as to suggest that the pagan gods are not omnipotent. Perhaps this invention highlights the fact that Roman-Greco belief, from which the pastoral form emerges, does not promise the same kind of eternal

¹ *King James Bible*, Heb. 12:26

² Netzley (2015): 158.

salvation that Christianity offers. From the outset of the poem, Milton demonstrates that the “lucky words” of the Roman muses only decorate the speaker’s “destined urn” (20). Evidently, the muses’ ability to inspire artistic creation culminates only in death. Milton continues to invoke the pastoral through images of nature solely to invert it:

The willows, and the hazel copses green,
Shall now no more be seen
Fanning their joyous leaves to thy soft lays. (42-43)

The fact that Milton does not qualify in what way “[t]he willows, and the hazel copses green, / Shall now no more be seen” until the following line implies not the death of Lycidas but also “willows” and “the hazel copses,” two standard images of the pastoral mode. According to Lauren Shohet, the organization of these lines imply “that the trees will no longer exist, that their very presence depends upon Lycidas.”³ It is not until the end of the final line from the passage that we learn that the speaker is referring to the “soft lays” of Lycidas, whom he addresses in the second person as though face-to-face.

While music and song, especially in the pastoral, often revolve around the seemingly perfect feeling of happiness, their coming into existence suggests their departure from it. The speaker of the poem directs our attention to the presence of song through negation—a negative presence:⁴ “the rural ditties were not mute” (32); “Fauns with clov’n heel / From the glad sound would not be absent long” (34-35). This negative construction, however, reinforces the present condition of loss that colors the poem, for “rural ditties [are now] mute” and “Fauns” producing “glad sound [are now] absent long.” The actual rhyme of these lines reinforces this sense of loss in sound. At first, as the speaker notes, “our song” is rhymed with “long” (36, 25). But “mute” is rhymed with “flute” so as to suggest the instrument is “mute[d]” before the “flute” can even make a sound. John Savoie notes that the patterns of rhyme in “Lycidas” are erratic, occurring too soon or too late, whereas “[a] dozen or so lines never rhyme at all, subtly haunting the poem with the semiconscious aural emblem of absence.”⁵ While the absence of sound is a prevalent aspect of the poem, the presence of sound puts weight on the elegy: “But O the heavy change, now thou art gone, / Now thou art gone and never must return” (37-38). The o-vowels reflect the actual sound that someone would make when mourning, and their length being long o’s slows down the movement of sound through the entire line. Also, the repetition of “thou art gone” not only underscores the gravity of Lycidas’ death but conveys disbelief in its happening while the juxtaposition of “[n]ow” and “never” creates a scale between the present condition of sadness and the eternal weight of loss.

The loss of Lycidas also reflects something much larger than the death of one man: the end of pagan thought and worship, which Christianity supplants through its monotheistic, all-knowing creator, the one true God. It is important to note that Milton’s treatment of the

³ Shohet (2005): 106.

⁴ Shohet (2005): 105.

⁵ Savoie (2019): 128.

pagan gods takes central stage in his poem, “On the Morning of Christ’s Nativity”, as well as *Paradise Lost*; the pagan gods and old forms of worship must end in order for the birth of Christ and rise of Christianity to restore humankind. In “Lycidas”, the classical gods and goddesses, who infuse the elegy with creative inspiration, do not provide the primary speaker, the young shepherd, with self-assuredness, only existential dread: “Where were ye, nymphs, when the remorseless deep / Closed o’er the head of your loved Lycidas” (50-1)? The minor goddesses of nature, “nymphs”, are common figures in pastoral poetry, which often depicts rural life as idyllic. However, the juxtaposition of “nymphs” and the harsh reality of the “remorseless deep” implicates the inherent fabrication of “nymphs” as well as the pastoral mode itself, which stems from a literary and mythological pagan tradition. Lawrence W. Hyman notes that “Milton never allows us to forget that Lycidas died by drowning.”⁶ Death at sea is the point of no return, and thus ranks among the worst kinds of fate that a mortal drowned at sea could have according to pagan thought. Completing the rites of the burial of the dead was one of the most sacred forms of pagan worship in classical antiquity. Charon’s *obolos*—coins placed in or on the mouth—served as a necessary toll for the safe passage of the dead into the underworld. If such rites went unobserved, the souls of the departed would remain forever restless.

Not even the Roman god of the sea, Neptune, is able to understand the reason behind Lycidas’ death, nor are other pagan entities able to account for it. Neptune himself asks the oceans over which he has dominion: “What hard mishap hath doomed this gentle swain” (92)? The only response that Neptune can find is in nothing: the seas and winds “knew not of his story” (95). The etymology of the English “story” comes from the Greek word *historia* (ἱστορία), which means ‘history’ or ‘knowledge,’ but *historia* derives the noun *histor* (ἱστωρ), which means ‘witness;’ ironically, Lycidas has no ‘witness’ to understand where he is and for what reason he perished: his body is lost at sea. The speaker then refers to “[t]he pilot of the Galilean Lake,” a celebratory title for St. Peter (109). M.J. Edwards notes that Christ saves Peter from drowning: “Far from walking on water, Peter flounders when he presumptuously attempts this feat and is saved by Christ from sinking (Matthew 14:29-30).”⁷ Perhaps Milton invokes St. Peter because of his eagerness to be like Christ and St. Peter hence becomes identifiable with Lycidas, who has died but is also restored by the sacrifice of Christ for the forgiveness of sins. David Sansone suggests that the conclusion of St. Peter’s words in the poem—“But that two-handed engine at the door / Stands ready to smite once, and smite no more”—identifies the “engine” as a winnowing fan.⁸ The separation of wheat from chaff is a common biblical metaphor for the coming judgment of God. However, Sansone argues that “the metaphor helps to prepare, in a very subtle fashion, for the message of hope and salvation with which the poem closes.”⁹ It is only Christ who “[t]hrough the dear might of Him that walked the waves” has the power to save Lycidas from death, who has been lost to the sea. It is also important to note, as John Savoie argues, “the final stanza settles the meter and rhyme and resolves this peculiar prosody of grief.”¹⁰

⁶ Hyman (1983): 7.

⁷ Edwards (2011): 608.

⁸ Sansone (2006): 333.

⁹ Sansone (2006): 341.

¹⁰ Savoie (2019): 128.

The focus of this essay has been on the presence of death not so much as a disruption to but as a specific aspect of the pastoral mode in Milton's "Lycidas". The loss of Lycidas often functions at a subterranean level in the work and does not become readily apparent until one gives close attention to the numerous syntactic constructions and theological suggestions hidden throughout. It is especially interesting to consider the juxtaposition between the loss of Lycidas, whom Milton based on the death of his real-life friend, Edward King, and the artifice of the pastoral mode which Milton has inherited. Nevertheless, the pastoralism of "Lycidas" does not lie far from intrusive destruction.

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