1992

Lycidas: Eternity As Artifice

Thomas H. Blackburn
Swarthmore College

Recommended Citation
http://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-english-lit/232

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English Literature at Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Literature Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Works. For more information, please contact myworks@swarthmore.edu.
THOUGH READERS from Samuel Johnson to John Crowe Ransom have questioned the aesthetic, emotional, and intellectual coherence of Lycidas, the most prominent current readings of the elegy see it as achieving in a unity of form and content the status of eternal artifact, an image or mimesis of transcended change which confers the benefits of that transcendence on reader and speaker/poet alike. Two brief quotations from Edward W. Tayler’s essay on the poem may represent the conclusions of this sort of reading at its best:

Both Lycidas and Lycidas sink in order to mount. By what may be thought of as an almost muscular effort of the verse itself—the successive movements of the three sections—Milton readies us to acknowledge yet once more the truth of the Christian truism, for this pastoral monody owes a large part of its artistic success to its having been constructed in imitation of itself. Lycidas endures, triumphantly, as a work of art that is what it says.

The natural cycle that had been interrupted within nature and time before the season due has been perfected in the eternal realm. Three times, following the efforts of the pastoral singer, we have sought the greatest vision, each time mounting higher than the time before, until at last we see the analogy of the sun made good by the Son—no fond dream, no false surmise. It is the “season due.” (Patrides, p. 314)

While I do find that many aspects of form, image, and statement in the elegy support this notion of the work as an effective mimesis invoking the real presence of a “paradise within,” my aim is to suggest the simultaneous presence of a counterreading that comprehends and reveals eternity as artifice. My focus is on the gaps in the development of a transcendent reading, the moments when the poem seems undecidable, silent, or contradictory—as in the recourse to pastoral images for a vision which purports to transcend the limits of pastoral—and on the way in which the elegy at once suggests and violates the sort of formal unity which may represent the changeless stability of art free from nature’s vicissitudes. It is toward this final point that my analysis will move, but I first need to admit my understanding of what the poem is about.
M. H. Abrams, writing in 1957, identified “five types” of Lycidas, adding what he called his “doggedly literal” sixth, necessarily superior, reading (Patrides, p. 225). In the succeeding four decades I am sure at least half a dozen more Lycidas’s could easily be identified, including dialectical, pedagogical, and oedipal versions, several of which Abrams alludes to in the 1983 postscript to the revised edition of the Patrides anthology, which first printed the 1957 article (Patrides, pp. 341–45). I am much less concerned than Abrams with confining the poem’s possibilities to a single subject or purpose, and much less certain of the possibility of a “literal” reading, though I willingly agree with him that how one interprets depends largely on the perspective one brings to the work. I read the elegy as at least “about” Edward King, Milton, the pastoral tradition, poetry and poets, death, and the central mystery of Christian faith. Though the issue of the speaker, or speakers, in the poem is even more complex than most readers assume, I see Lycidas as a dramatic search for a satisfying answer to large questions which the poem treats as urgently occasioned by the death of one with whom the speaker has multiple affinities. The questions can be summed up in the query which Adam in Paradise Lost, having in vision witnessed the murder of Abel by Cain, addresses to Michael: “Is Piety thus and pure Devotion paid?” (XI, 452). 3 Like the repeated questions in Lycidas about the value of chaste poetry and religious vocation, Adam’s query incorporates an expectation, or at least a wish, that virtue should receive some reward other than untimely and apparently undeserved death; it makes problematic, at least for a moment, the distributive aspect of divine justice from the perspective of one who is seeking to discover how to live “in this world of evil, in the midst whereof God hath placed us unavoidably” (Areopagitica, p. 733).

The formal configuration of the last eight lines of Lycidas for many readers seems to affirm and embody the achievement of an answer to fearful doubts about the destiny of one who virtuously pursues the “faithful Herdman’s art” in poetry and priesthood. Fully rhymed in an ottava rima and syntactically a complete unit, the stanza appears to confirm the resolution of the uncertainties which drive earlier movements in the elegy. As the end to a procession of verse paragraphs so varied in length and irregular in rhyme scheme as almost to deserve John Crow Ransom’s epithets, “willful and illegal,” the fully formed stanza also contrasts specifically with two earlier imperfect intimations of form (Patrides, p. 75). The first of these is the opening fourteen-line paragraph of the elegy, which to many readers has seemed a shadowy sonnet. The hint of a form not perfected suggests a formal analogy to the speaker’s announced emotional and artistic unreadiness to deal with the poetic task at hand. The integrity
of the closing ottava rima, in contrast, would thus express dramatic arrival at confident artistic control and emotional resolution. Louis Martz suggests a second contrast based on the evocation of sonnet form rather than its imperfection. The shadowy sonnet, he argues, calls appropriately at the opening of the elegy on the form’s “tradition of intimate personal utterance,” while the ottava rima stanza, associated with the narrative objectivity assumed by epic poets, signals at the end of the poem the speaker’s success in dealing with the work of mourning.4

The second trace of stanza form is in the ottava rima scheme of the rhymes in St. Peter’s speech (124–31). One might see these rhymes, using Martz’s insight, as fitting for a speech which promises an eventual objectivity of justice. This eventuality, however, is not realized within the poem and the lines do not really form a stanza since line 124 is part of a separate syntactical unit. These lines, moreover, conclude with the notorious crux of the “two-handed engine” (130). Set against these two evocative but incomplete forms the coda might well be read as a final turn from intimate anguish to objectivity in the calm of regular form. So interpreted, the coda becomes an important part of those readings which see the poem—albeit by a bewildering variety of pathways—arriving through a complex yet finally unified movement at an unequivocal emotional, theological, and aesthetic conclusion.

The coda, however, is not placed in the poem only by its contrasts with preceding irregularities. Though in that aspect it may seem to epitomize closure, from another perspective it works to reveal closure itself as a “false surmise,” through the elegy’s most radical departure from the conventions of form which it evokes. In placement and content the coda recalls the closing half of the narrative framing devices conventional in pastoral poems generally, in dream-vision poems, and in funeral elegies such as Milton’s own Latin Elegy II. But Lycidas has no opening “frame.” Ellen Z. Lambert is among those critics who note this anomaly: “Milton is, to my knowledge, the only pastoral elegist to dispense with the opening frame while retaining the closing one.” She goes on, however, to treat the coda as nonetheless expressing closure as the culmination of the elegist’s gradual discovery of “those assurances of order traditionally conferred by the frame.”5 Though this analysis recognizes the way in which the coda evokes an idea of order, it ignores the even greater impact of the unexpected emergence of the half-frame. The coda at once evokes the framing convention and calls attention to its violation.

The half-frame also introduces as speaker an equally unexpected new voice. This new voice further surprises us by calling the speaker of the preceding verses an “uncouth swain” (my emphasis). Many readers,
rightly impressed by the erudition and complex art of those verses, simply ignore the negative connotations of this naming. Among those who do pause at the appellation, some turn only to the sense of “uncouth” as “unknown,” suggesting a relationship between the swain and the Milton of *Sonnet VII* or *Ad Patrem*, acutely conscious of the fact that he had not yet made his mark in the world. Brooks and Hardy do note the surprise of the coda and the derogatory connotations of the adjective as it links crudity and ignorance to being unknown in civil society. They limit this criticism, however, to the “Doric” strain in the swain’s utterances, to the limitations of that low pastoral which the elegy finally functions to subsume in “the truth of Christian revelation” (Patrides, p. 156). Tayler recognizes the unavoidable force of “uncouth” as “ignorant and rude,” and as perhaps “afford[ing] the poet some mild amusement” (Patrides, pp. 314–15), and reminds us that the swain initially presents himself as “uncouth” in that sense in his plucking unripe poetic leaves with “forced fingers rude” (4).

By the coda, however, rudeness and ignorance are supposed to have been replaced by transcendent vision, by an apotheosis not only of Lycidas, but also of the art of song which completes the work of mourning and the voice that sings it—or so most readers of the elegy would have us conclude. Tayler integrates further connotations of “uncouth” into his exemplary reading noted earlier: “the song has moved from the personal to the impersonal, from the vision bounded by time to the vision of eternity. The swain, no longer merely unknown and rustic, may now bear as well the other meanings of *uncouth* that were current at the time: marvelous, uncommon, strange, wonderful—as in the ‘uncouth revelations’ of St. Bridgit (1648; cited OED) (Patrides, p. 317).

The release of these positive connotations linking the swain, as Tayler puts it, to “Lycidas and the sun and the Son and (hopefully) the reader,” depends on the reader’s assent to a prior metamorphosis in the pastoral vision, though it is also treated as evidence for that assent. Caught up in this process, the continuing presence of the negative meanings seems to fade away. I shall later question the quality of that prior metamorphosis in the vision of Lycidas among the saints, as well as the coda’s utility as evidence for it. For the moment, I want only to note that the multiple possibilities of meaning for “uncouth,” and the difficulty of deciding which shade of meaning should prevail in context, present in small an image of the difficulty of reading *Lycidas*. I hope to show that interpretations which subsume the unruly possibilities in pursuit of a unified vision of art and belief are reductive. They fail to do justice to *Lycidas* in particular, and in
general to Milton's own lifelong resistance to simple closure, as the equivalent in art and life of "cloistered virtue."

I have thus far argued that the absence of an introductory framing narrative counters and subverts the closural implications of the coda's *ottava rima* form. I do not intend, however, to argue that this subversion negates closure absolutely—that too would be reductive. I propose a mode of representation in *Lycidas* which, to put it fashionably, resists reading—if by reading we mean fixing on a single univocal signified for each signifier—at the same time as it expresses the necessity of reading, of making the choices which enable act and song. Before exploring further the ways in which the swain's "uncouthness" points to this mode of representation, I want to look at several other instances in which the language of the coda invites a negative reading of its apparent affirmations.

In one of the few attempts at a reading of *Lycidas* from a postmodern critical perspective, Herman Rapaport suggests that the coda is one in a series with the swain's earlier repetitions of return to a pastoral landscape after successive assays at resolution fell short of closure. That he is headed for "fresh woods" and "pastures new" (my emphasis), Rapaport suggests, indicates "that he has not been able to overcome or exit from the problematic of loss." Many other readers have found that "fresh" and "new" qualify the rural scene to signify that the swain departs for "woods" and "pastures" essentially different from the fragile lawns and woods of the shattered idyll once shared with Lycidas. Such readings of the coda's landscape again presume that the elegy pits a pastoral with naturalistic and pagan mythological referents against a second whose context is the "Good Shepherd" of the Christian supernatural. When this second set of referents is evoked through the "dear might of him who walk't the waves" (173), the "false surmise" of images and figures traditional in pagan versions of immortality is said to become privileged as "true surmise": a set of "shadowy types," as it were, in which the promise of Christian eternity may be perceived.

We may question, however, the extent to which "fresh" and "new" can effectively confer privilege when we look at close verbal contexts in the poem rather than depending on assumptions of a prior metamorphosis in vision. The word *fresh* appears twice before in the poem: first in the "fresh dews of night" which satisfied the thirst of the flocks in the recollected Cambridge idyll (29), and again in the penultimate effort to seek pastoral consolation in those flowers of the spring on whose "fresh lap" the "swart star sparely looks" (139). These pleasant associations, however, will not by themselves suffice to free *fresh* from the network of
difference which is its context in the poem and thus to signify a transformed value. Just as new depends on old, so is the very idea of freshness defined by the always threatening alternative of staleness or rot (e.g., by “Canker” or “Frost” or “rank mists” [45–47]). “Fresh dews” are fully subject to “heavy change” as the loss of Lycidas affects all objects of evanescence and innocence. Though the dogstar may cast its withering look only sparingly on the freshness of spring flowers, it reminds us again of the transience of these natural beauties and their inadequacy as literal consolations for human mortality. New and fresh cannot so easily escape their contexts to create immutable landscapes. The final scene of the elegy remains no less susceptible to the ruthless shears of the furies, or the mysterious “curses dark / That sunk so low that sacred head” of Lycidas (102). That pastures and woods appear renewed and refreshed for the swain does nonetheless point to a changed vision, but not one which finds the swain improbably freed from the risks of time by incorporation into a literal vision of eternity.

Another detail in the coda may involve a return as much as a new beginning. The “blue” of the swain’s mantle has come to be read primarily as an emblem of hope, again signifying the mourner’s transformation. Blue, however, is also the hue of Cambridge University. Camus, the river god who represents the university in mourning for its “dearest pledge,” is dressed in academic robes adapted to pastoral allegory as “mantle hairy” and “bonnet sedge” (104). The “mantle blue,” then, as adapted academic gown, hints at a return to the university where Lycidas and the surviving singer practiced their poetry to the delight of “old Damoetas,” and pursued their learning for that other pastoral trade, the ministry. In the context of the coda, to wrap oneself in such a garment is, on the one hand, to reclaim the practice of those “trades,” the temporal value of which the unresolved fate of Lycidas had called into question. In the tradition of the pastoral elegy we may also recognize that the swain’s mantle affirms his status as inheritor of Lycidas’s pastoral role. On the other hand, we know that neither all the powers of song nor all the pastoral virtues nurtured at the university could keep Lycidas literally alive in the swain’s world. Any assumption that merit as poet or priest will guarantee long life or mortal renown belongs to the same world of “false surmise” as the illusion of immortal flowers decking the “Laureate hearse where Lycid lies” (151).

On a more literal level, the swain’s “twitch[ing]” of the mantle seems to image the settling of a blanketlike garment closer about the shoulders, perhaps as the setting sun takes warmth from the air. The need for such a mantle reminds us that the “mount[ing] high” of “him who walk’d the waves” has not repealed the cycle of light and dark for men “in this world
of evil.” Though sunrise may figure Christ’s resurrection, the swain must continue to live in a world where sunset also figures a daily repetition of the lapsarian “eclipse” in which was rigged the ship of Lycidas’s untimely fate.

I have been suggesting ways in which the coda, in its structural relation to the elegy as a whole, and in some aspects of its content, opens the possibility of a counter reading, one which questions the completeness of a supposed transfiguration of time and landscape. The shift to a third person speaker in the coda may also lead us in a negative direction. Donald Friedman, like Tayler, finds ironic humor in his speaker’s insistence on the rustic artlessness of the highly wrought verses which have gone before, but though self-deprecating humor is attractive, that is not all there is in the shift (Patrides, p. 299). Labeling the preceding singer an “uncouth swain,” and his song a “Doric lay,” distances us from him. He becomes the object of the discourse of a superior speaker rather than the speaking subject of his own song. Looking back at the song from this distance, we may wish to ask whether there is some context other than the rustic associations of the poem’s conventions which defines the entire preceding utterance as “uncouth” or “swainish.”

The fundamental paradox of the pastoral convention makes “swainish” discourse the vehicle for complex views of life and art, views which we take to be those of the “couth” city poet who creates the country voice. The coda of Lycidas, though it maintains the pastoral scene, reveals that superior “city” voice. This superiority suggests in part a self-referential knowledge of the conventionality of the pastoral genre itself. It also implies recognition of the conventionality—the artifice—of the immortality mythos. Immortality, like the bygone days of pastoral innocence in the childhood of man and his world, can be known only as a fiction by fallen mortals, who are all by definition “uncouth” when it comes to actual experience of life after death or to the larger issue of knowing God as he “really is.” The swain is uncouth because he cannot “know” God in any way beyond his own “pin-fold” perspective, in any unmediated way which can literally perceive or express radical otherness. In this aspect, the swain may represent the irremediable mortal ignorance of all humankind—the poet’s recognition that nothing in the poem, nothing in the conventions of human art or human language, can represent God without an accommodation to human capacities.

In making this argument I am inevitably arguing as well that Milton, creator and manipulator of all the voices in the poem, is in some way conscious of the limits of expression defined above. In a more extensive study, I believe a case could be made for a progressive decline in Milton’s naive confidence that the “deep transported mind may soar / Above the
wheeling poles, and at Heav’n’s door / Look in, and see each blissful deity,” (Vacation Exercise, 33–35), even while the effort to “know God aright” remains the center of his agenda as man and poet. The notion of accommodation developed in Paradise Lost and Christian Doctrine is usually read to affirm the possibility of conveying to mortals knowledge of God and his plan for man. Accommodation, however, as this passage from Christian Doctrine makes clear, is necessary precisely because it is impossible to know God “as he really is”:

When we speak of knowing God, it must be understood with reference to the imperfect comprehension of man; for to know God as he really is, far transcends the powers of man’s thoughts, much more of his perception. . . . Our safest way is to form in our minds such a conception of God, as shall correspond with his own delineation and representation of himself in the sacred writings. For granting that both in the literal and figurative descriptions of God, he is not exhibited as he really is, but in such a manner as may be within the scope of our comprehensions, yet we ought to entertain such a conception of him, as he, in condescending to accommodate himself to our capacities has shown that he desires we should conceive. (Hughes, p. 905)

By no intellectual or sensible effort can one reach the transcendent other, the signified which would fix the meaning of all signs. Raphael (most prominently) in Paradise Lost, like Milton in the passage above, urges the reader of the available signs to suspend awareness of their limits, as he wonders how he may

unfold
The secrets of another world, perhaps
Not lawful to reveal? yet for thy good
This is dispens’t, and what surmounts the reach
Of human sense, I shall delineate so,
By lik’ning spiritual to corporal forms,
As may express them best, though what if Earth
Be but the shadow of Heav’n, and things therein
Each to other like, more than on Earth is thought? (V, 568–76)

Raphael’s speech suggests that one should not question too far the degree to which accommodated expression really does bring one to “Heaven’s door,” but it never itself gets beyond terms such as “shadow” and “like,” which always point at least as much to difference as to identity. To say, as Milton does in Christian Doctrine and through Raphael, that it is impossible, and perhaps even dangerous, to know God as he really is, but that we can know he wishes us to accept accommodated revelation as a sufficient sign of his reality, clearly begs the question: a priori knowledge
obtained from some source other than the accommodated signs to be validated is necessary. The language of scripture and of the poet who seeks to share the offices of scripture can be known as true expressions of divine reality only when interpreted with faith as a premise. Without that extrinsic source of privilege one faces only an array of signs endlessly deferred, “images that fresh images beget,” without ever reaching the source of all images. The rereading of the “low” pastoral images as true signs of the “good shepherd,” and the reading of the vision of apotheosis as a scene truly other than the “cursed” lawns and rills of life, require privileging by faith. Moving from formal irregularity to regularity, from “rural ditties” to sacred song, from questions to what seems to be an answer, Lycidas has seemed for many readers to go beyond deferred signification to reveal that absent term which confers privilege, that is, to reach somehow beyond its language to enact faith. The counterreading I am exploring recognizes the force of this supposed penetration, but finds in its climactic moments only another layer of artifice and a continuing absence—not eternal reality fixed forever, but, again, “fresh images.”

Any argument for this particular variety of double reading must rest not only on interpretation of the coda, but also on a rereading, which the coda encourages, of the ostensibly transcendent movement that immediately precedes it, that “prior metamorphosis of vision” to which I earlier alluded. I have characterized the coda as a “return” to the mutable “lower” pastoral landscape of pagan myths and symbolic flora which the elegy, in the vision of heavenly groves and streams, is presumed to have transcended. A significant “return,” however, takes place before the more obvious shift in the coda. James Holly Hanford notes this earlier version, and is puzzled by it, but, as a solution to his unease with the invocation of Lycidas as “Genius of the shore,” offers only Milton’s obeisance to tradition (Patrides, p. 44). Renato Poggioli simply conflates pagan and Christian terms to see Lycidas made “sacred patron” and “holy protector” of the shore and seafarers.11

After convincing us of the pagan genealogy of the genius in Milton’s earlier poems, William Oram nonetheless asserts its function here as an image of Christ and an “abiding example of the dedicated Christian.”12 But such claims cannot disassociate the “Genius of the shore” from the kind of pastoral that in preceding repetitions signified the failure of “higher mood” to bring closure. Lycidas does not here become Christ, or even an uneasily Roman Catholic intercessory saint, but joins the company of the nymphs, of Calliope herself, the local druidic deities, Phoebus Apollo, St. Peter, and even St. Michael (as near an approach to a Christian “Genius of the shore” as the elegy affords).13 None of these “holy protec-
tors” could insure long life or just reward for Lycidas, nor can the “Gen-

ius” he becomes truly protect the surviving swain. Reversion here to the 
“low” pastoral norm of local deities reveals parallels in structure with the 
preceding major movements of the elegy, in which each attempt to reach 
closure ends in continuing deferral and reveals the failure of a “higher 
mood” to reach beyond itself. That the final movement does lead to the 
end of the poem can be read as defining a crucial difference within the 
parallelism, but the parallel also places the purportedly transcendent vi-

sion itself as yet another reentry into the maze of repetitions which charac-
terize mortal life and language.

Simply to assert that the landscape which Lycidas now enjoys is of 
“other groves and streams” (174, emphasis added) cannot decisively differen-
tiate them from the fragile pastoral of lawns and forsaken primroses, nor 
from the uncertainties of the “woods” and “pastures” the “uncouth” singer 
will enter at the end of the elegy. Driven by the swain’s declaration that 
Lycidas is not dead, we may at first want to assume that the analogy 
between his “mounting high” and that of the sun somehow voids the 
sequel of sunset, but again that assumption requires a leap past language 
which language cannot make. The scene “out of nature” must still bear 
nature’s form if it is to be intelligible. The moment one aspires to give the 
absolute otherness which defines divinity a “local habitation and a name,” 
a fall into language takes place and accommodation cannot be avoided— 
heaven will have groves and streams and Lycidas will return in the mun-
dane fiction of “Genius of the shore.”

I realize that this denial of the transforming power of the swain’s 
vision goes against the testimony of many very skillful and sensitive 
readers of the poem. It presses against the emotional power which I feel 
in the cadences of the saints “That sing, and singing in their glory move, 
/ And wipe the tears for ever from his eyes” (180–81), and the vision 
does lead to the end of the swain’s mourning and of his song. I neverthe-
less understand this vision in the perspective of the declaration which 
both precedes it and purports to follow from it, and of the descent to 
“genius” and the coda which come after. The space between the exhorta-
tion to the poet-loving dolphins and the command that the shepherds 
“Weep no more” is one of profound silence (164–65). I know of no 
explanation—psychological, imagistic, or structural—which satisfactorily 
bridges the gap between the new command and the last appeals to “false 
surmise” in the hope that St. Michael or a dolphin might “waft” Lycidas 
back unscathed to the shores from which he departed. How one reads 
that silence will determine, or rather overdetermine, a reading of the 
vision. Only the assumption that the silence expresses the influx of
divine inspiration will lead to the further assumption that the vision is “real” in a presence beyond the language in which it must be expressed. The privileging of this assumption depends, as I suggested earlier, on an a priori commitment to that reality as the basis of interpretation, or at least on a critical commitment to upholding the seamless artistic unity of the elegy, the “prophetic strain” of its author, or all of these. To deconstruct that privileging does not necessarily make a reader “of the Devil’s party.” I would contend that understanding a “double” reading of Lycidas allies one with Milton’s party, and humanity’s.

In Lycidas the superior voice of the speaker in the coda has revealed the limitations which the necessity of accommodation places on the song and the understanding of the shepherd elegist. As the restorative effect on the swain seems to affirm the reality of transcendent referents for his pastoral fictions, this speaker makes us nonetheless aware that it is still artifice which results, and insists on the literal inexpressibility of that reality. The pastoral vision in which Lycidas is immortally justified remains at the same distance from any transcendent truth as the “trifling fictions” of the “lower” strain. Entry into any reality “invisible to mortal sight” (PL III, 55) remains deferred throughout the elegy, not only at the end of the Phoebus and St. Peter sections. This deferral is inherent in the language of the “higher” strain itself, and is recognized in the series of returns and new beginnings which make up the movements of the poem, including the descent to “Genius of the shore” and the “Tomorrow” of the coda’s objectified swain.

The deferral of unaccommodated reunion with Lycidas does not for me, as it might for Dr. Johnson, require a negative reading of the elegy as a whole. Deferral is essential for the life of the swain and the song of the elegist. The process of mourning originates in the mourner’s identification with the departed, but can only end if the necessity of separation is accepted. The swain’s (and “Milton’s”) likenesses to Lycidas give rise to anxieties about his own future, and then to the possibility of finding consolation and assurance in the vision of Lycidas among the saints. At this point, however, complete identification must also be resisted. Genuine closure of the gap between mortal and immortal sight requires and is synonymous with death, or at least with an ecstatic inspiration which escapes the human condition at the cost of a paralysis of action and speech. I sense in the return to the visible landscape in the coda a relief much like that when Milton as narrator in Book VII of Paradise Lost asserts, “More safe I Sing with mortal voice” (24), as the epic scene becomes “narrower bound / Within the visible Diurnal Sphere” (21–22). In Book III the attempt to express God directly, as the narrator wonders whether he may do so
“unblam’d,” brings the poet to the brink of silence in “Bright effluence of bright essence increate” (6) and “Dark with excessive bright” (380), both formulations at some distance from “common intelligible sound.” In Lycidas the silence which is supposedly overcome in the accommodated landscape of the visionary apotheosis is acknowledged for a moment in the “unexpressive nuptial Song” (176, emphasis added). Though Milton affirms his desire for the revelations of those moments when it seems possible to hear celestial harmonies and see heavenly sights, he is always aware that were he actually to do so sight and sound would be shrouded in the dark silence of death or ecstasy. To claim to speak God literally is to aspire to know as he knows, and, as we know from Paradise Lost, in life that is not only impossible but also blasphemous and hubristic.

The question for swain and poet in Lycidas may be restated as how one is to live a life in which act and choice have meaning in a world which kills Lycidas and rolls on “To good malignant, to bad men benign” (PL XLI, 538). On the one hand, the swain’s vision must be distanced, recognized as a fiction, if a return to a life of song and action is to be possible. To live, on the other hand, also requires some comforting garment in which one can wrap oneself against mortal despair. This garment, however, can only be structured visibly in language, and the languages of faith and fiction are shown in the artifice of Lycidas to be the same. Eternal life for the “faithful Herdman” becomes what we might call a “necessary fiction.” Two other readers have seemed willing to accept the vision of Lycidas at the marriage feast of the Lamb as such a fiction. Both, however, go on to turn that fiction into an effective signifier of a transcendent reality, and thus not in my sense a fiction at all. Isabel MacCaffrey, for instance, speaks of the elegy’s final paragraphs as recording “a development in the speaker’s treatment of his metaphor, from the naive assumption that it represents actuality, to the recognition of it as one of man’s great symbols for ultimate reality, securely rooted in the imaginative life” (Patrides, p. 265). Donald M. Friedman comes even closer to a notion of the irremediable absence of that “ultimate reality” but still finds it made present through the fictions of pastoral: “This fiction has opened the way to a truth that can be expressed only in fiction; yet the discovery of that truth renders us, and the swain, forever unable to mistake fiction for what it is supposed to represent” (Patrides, pp. 299–300). The essence of fiction, I would argue, is just that mistake: a “truth” which can be expressed only through a fiction is inescapably itself a fiction.

We have, in a sense, come full circle back to Dr. Johnson’s complaint about the danger of “trifling fictions.” The way in which the poet’s “fictions” make problematic the reality of the faith they purport to represent
is given a more modern cast by Peter Sacks. In a psychological reading of the way in which *Lycidas* completes the work of mourning by moving “from submissive gestures of compulsion and loss to an internalizing counter-usurpation of totemic power,” Sacks discovers complications in the elegy similar to those I have been exploring:

We find it hard to avoid the recognition that it is, after all, the poet who has Christ raise Lycidas. The frame of fictionality encompasses even that supreme action, which brings us to the disquieting region of conjecture, so important to Milton, of whether Christianity may be no more than a superior product (superior to classical mythology, for example) of man’s imagination. What we have already seen to be the poem’s repeated questioning of its own fictions cannot entirely be escaped (. . . how is he who walked the waves so different from Palaemon? Is he more real, or is he simply more powerful?).

“Truth” or “ultimate reality” superior to imagination can be found in the fictions of language only if one believes it is already there, a priori. The label *truth* is only the privileging of one way of reading (or misreading) the fictive medium.

The important matter, I believe, for Milton’s speaker is the difference between a good fiction and a bad one. A good fiction provides a paradigm for life which enables “wayfaring” and “warfaring,” the poet’s song and the politician’s actions. The adequacy of the fiction which in *Lycidas* promises to supplant the “false surmise” of pagan and naturalistic pastoral is defined by the existence of the poem itself, and within it by the completion of the swain’s song and his observed willingness to arise and reimmerse himself in the world of choice where the outcome of choice cannot be guaranteed. The superior voice in the coda may approve of and share that readiness, but reveals its dependence on an always deferred closure, on a gap which mortal sight cannot bridge nor mortal voice close. The “artifice of eternity” into which Lycidas is gathered is accepted as a necessary construction, but both poet and reader remain aware of the equally necessary resistance of life and language to the silence that true closure brings with it.

Swarthmore College

NOTES

1. My debt to the legions of scholars and critics who have written on *Lycidas* is immense and implicit throughout this paper. An early version of this essay was read in the
Milton General Session at the 1985 MLA Convention in Chicago. Though I frequently cite his work as a focus for my disagreement with current readings, I owe Edward W. Taylor, chair of that session, a special debt for helping me to more clearly shape my ideas. The many references to essays in the late C. A. Patrides’s anthology, Milton’s “Lycidas”: The Tradition and the Poem, new and rev. ed. (Columbia, 1983), are cited parenthetically in my text.

2. Here and in my title I am obviously playing with that “artifice of eternity” yearned for by the aging speaker in W. B. Yeats’s “Sailing to Byzantium.” In seeking a timeless existence in art “out of nature,” he fixes ironically on the natural form of a golden bird. In “Byzantium” this artifact from the “Golden smithies of the Emperor” reappears among images of art which in gold and marble seem to transcend all “complexities” of “blood-begotten spirits,” but are seen to “crack” and are revealed again as “images that fresh images beget, / That dolphin-torn, that gong-tormented sea.” The “eternity” cannot be realized through “artifice,” as only images which endlessly defer access to an imagined transcendence can be the poet’s material; “eternity,” then, is “artifice.” Quotations are from The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W. B. Yeats, ed. Peter Allt and Russell K. Alspach (New York, 1957), pp. 408, 498.

3. All of my citations of Milton’s poems and prose, unless noted otherwise, are from John Milton: Complete Poems and Major Prose, ed. Merritt Y. Hughes (New York, 1957).

4. Louis Martz, Poet of Exile (New Haven, 1980), p. 74. Taylor points out that the rhyme scheme of the coda might also be identified with the Tuscan stanza called strambotta. See Milton’s Poetry: Its Development in Time (Pittsburgh, 1979). The associations of this stanza are with peasant singers rather than with the writers of narrative. See Ernest H. Wilkins, A History of Italian Literature (Cambridge, Mass., 1954), p. 10. This identification would make the stanza of the coda itself “swainish,” and could support the ironies of deferred closure which I examine later in this essay.


7. See especially MacCaffrey, in Patrides, p. 264.

8. See, for example, Robert C. Fox, “Milton’s Lycidas, 192–3,” Expositor IX (1951), 54. Taylor relates the swain’s “mantle blue” to the blue skies accompanying the rising sun in a general paradigm of resurrection (Patrides, p. 318).


10. My assertions here about accommodation deserve explanation at a length not possible on this occasion. Let me note only that in the theory of signs which incorporates accommodation, at least from Augustine to Milton, the signified is always prior to the signifier, and the validity of the signifier is dependent on knowledge by faith of the signified. See, for instance, Marcia L. Colish, The Mirror of Language: A Study in the Medieval Theory of Knowledge (New Haven, 1968), p. 34: “Signs never produce knowledge in the first instance. The subjective function of the signs in helping to communicate knowledge depends on the knower’s previous relationship to the object. If he is already a believer, he can recognize the sign as a sign of God and can judge how Godlike it is; the sign in turn can deepen his awareness of God.”


14. For Milton, if his later announced mortalism may be assumed here, the closure of this gap may even await the final trump when God becomes all in all and the distinction between heaven and earth, creator and created, is ended eternally. Barbara Johnson, "Fiction and Grief: The Pastoral Idiom of Milton's Lycidas," *MQ* XVIII, no. 3 (1984), 69–76, recognizes this complication, but resolves it by assuming that the speaker takes consolation in a notion that the angelic choirs will sing for Lycidas "at the end of time."

15. Peter Sacks, *The English Elegy* (Baltimore, 1985), p. 116. In an essay which finally arrives at a point quite different from mine, Lawrence W. Hyman, "Belief and Disbelief in Lycidas," *CE* XXXIII (1972), 532–42, also raises the issue of the fictionality of the poem's vision. He asserts that the coda cannot be brought "into the perspective of the rest of the poem. For Milton is quite obviously focusing our attention on the imaginary nature of his vision, just as a novelist [or a dream-vision poet] might tell us at the end of his story that the actions occurred in a dream" (p. 539).