Milton's "Lycidas": An Evaluation of Eight Approaches
And the Proposal of a Ninth Approach

by

Keith J. Winter

B.A., University of British Columbia, 1960

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfilment of
The Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts
in the Department
of
English

We accept this thesis as conforming to the
required standard

The University of British Columbia
May, 1965
ABSTRACT

The history of the literary criticism of "Lycidas" contains wide-spread disagreement and is punctuated with numerous altercations. The reputation of the poem has been built largely on the denial of the denials of its sincerity and unity. The point upon which most critics do agree is that "Lycidas" is undoubtedly one of the most problematic poems in the history of English literature. This power of "Lycidas" to intrigue the critics and to incite disagreement is best seen, I feel, in the long-standing controversy over whether the poem contains a unifying principle and, if so, what is it.

After reading through about two hundred articles on "Lycidas", I noticed that there were eight broad approaches to the poem. These are: imagistic, archetypal, technical, biographical, literal, mannerist, musical, and irrelevance of intention. This thesis is an attempt to evaluate the unifying principle implicit or explicit in each of these eight approaches. The aim of this thesis is not to explicate the entire poem, but to find a satisfactory unifying principle. For each of the eight approaches I have selected the one critic, or at most three, who best typifies this approach.
In the course of the discussion eight major fallacies will be offered as grounds for delimiting the eight unifying principles. There are: the faulty syllogism, the literal fallacy, the biographical fallacy, the fallacy of mistaking the author's intentions, the formal fallacy, the selective fallacy, the psychological fallacy, and the reductionsist fallacy. I do not wish to imply a one to one correspondence between the eight approaches and the eight fallacies; some approaches contain only one fallacy, whereas other contain several.

After evaluating the eight broad approaches to "Lycidas", this thesis will advance the conclusion that the unity of the poem is larger, more organic, more synthetic than that suggested by any of the eight approaches. The central unity of the poem is a buttressing principle in which the metaphorical, thematic, literal, biographical, manneristic, archetypal, and technical features of the poem mutually reinforce one another and fuse together into a total aesthetic impact.
In presenting this thesis in partial fulfilment of the requirements for an advanced degree at the University of British Columbia, I agree that the Library shall make it freely available for reference and study. I further agree that permission for extensive copying of this thesis for scholarly purposes may be granted by the Head of my Department or by his representatives. It is understood that copying or publication of this thesis for financial gain shall not be allowed without my written permission.

Department of English

The University of British Columbia,
Vancouver 8, Canada

Date April 12, 1965
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER</th>
<th>TABLE OF CONTENTS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>Introduction .................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II</td>
<td>Fallacies of the Type One Approach to &quot;Lycidas&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Introduction ................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Evaluation ...................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conclusion ...................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III</td>
<td>Fallacies of the Type Two Approach to &quot;Lycidas&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Introduction ................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Evaluation ...................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conclusion ...................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV</td>
<td>Fallacies of the Type Three Approach to &quot;Lycidas&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Introduction ................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Evaluation ...................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conclusion ...................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V</td>
<td>Fallacies of the Type Four Approach to &quot;Lycidas&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Introduction ................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Evaluation ...................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conclusion ...................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI</td>
<td>Fallacies of the Type Five Approach to &quot;Lycidas&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Introduction ................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Evaluation ...................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conclusion ...................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VII</td>
<td>Fallacies of the Type Six Approach to &quot;Lycidas&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Introduction ................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Evaluation ...................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conclusion ...................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VIII</td>
<td>Fallacies of the Type Seven Approach to &quot;Lycidas&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Introduction ................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Evaluation ...................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conclusion ...................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IX</td>
<td>Fallacies of the Type Eight Approach to &quot;Lycidas&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Introduction ................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Evaluation ...................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conclusion ...................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X</td>
<td>Conclusion ...................................</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bibliography ..............................</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction

The paragraphing is the key to the construction of "Lycidas". Each of the eleven verse paragraphs is a carefully constructed unit within the poem. Each paragraph contains one or more of the specific pastoral conventions. Each paragraph contains one or more -- sometimes numerous -- literary allusions to a specific Latin, Greek, Italian, French or English pastoral poem. To understand "Lycidas" the reader must educate his sensibilities to these artfully constructed divisions within the poem. Each of the eleven sections must cease to be an artificial excrescence; each must become an aesthetic platform from which the reader's imagination is launched into the total poetic experience of the poem. Moreover, the reader must train himself to catch literary allusions far more numerous and subtle than he would encounter ordinarily in the reading of a poem. The reader must become acquainted with the long procession of outstanding pastoral elegies which preceded "Lycidas". As Rosemond Tuve pointed out recently in her praiseworthy book, Images and Themes in Five Poems by Milton, "the reader is rare who brings to "Lycidas" that natural enjoyment of the form and immediate grasp of its modes of feeling which come
with wide and sympathetic reading -- of Castiglione and Sannazaro as well as Virgil, of Ronsard and Spenser and Marot, of Petrarch and Boccaccio and nonelegiac pastoral.\footnote{Rosemond Tuve, \textit{Images and Themes in Five Poems by Milton} (Chicago, 1961), p. 86-7.} She also indicates that "Milton wrote "Lycidas" in a continuing tradition, for those to whom finding pleasure and emotional immediacy in the similar works of just such famous predecessors was a genuine and usual experience."\footnote{Tuve, p. 87.}

It is evident, then, that the modern reader cannot approach "Lycidas" untutored. He must avail himself of the literary traditions and scholarship with which the poem is so solidly constructed. The problem for the reader now becomes the arduous task of deciding which literary traditions are relevant and which scholarship is valid and which is not. In view of the hundreds of articles written on "Lycidas" this task would seem endless, but fortunately nearly all the criticism falls neatly within eight broad approaches.

When the eight approaches to "Lycidas" are presented to the readers, he will be astonished by the diversity of the interpretations. He will, no doubt, feel better acquainted with the poem -- for, on the whole, the critics of "Lycidas" are not lacking in ingenuity and literary acumen -- but he will be faced with the problem of choosing one of the eight approaches. However, a
crushing blow awaits him. For it can be shown that each of the eight approaches rests upon one or more false assumptions. The reader is then faced with his original problem: he is left without a satisfactory synthesis of the poem.

A new approach to "Lycidas" is demanded. It must be one which includes all eleven of the major units of the poem; it must be one that explains the principle of composition which Milton employed; it must be one which offers a satisfactory synthesis of the poem; it must be one which is not founded upon a false assumption. To this fascinating challenge I propose to offer the following solution: that Milton's principle of composition was imitation, his intention excellence, and his method eclecticism; that the key to a synthesis of the poem lies in the fusion of tradition and the individual talent; that on the one hand, "no poet, no artist of any sort, has his complete meaning alone," and on the other hand, "the poet's mind is a receptacle for seizing and storing up numberless feelings, phrases, images, which remain there until all the particles which can unite to form a new compound are present together." What this "new compound" is, and what pitfalls and logical fallacies one must avoid to arrive at an

---

4 Eliot, p. 1421.
understanding of it, will be the major consideration of this paper. However, I feel it cannot be emphasized too often that Milton's method of composition in this poem (I do not wish to extrapolate to his other poems) is eclectic and that the poem must be examined in an eclectic manner. To grasp the total poetic experience in the poem we must constantly go from the whole to the parts and from the parts back to the whole again. If this is not done, the interpretation and synthesis of the poem will always remain one-sided and inadequate.
Fallacies of the Type One Approach to "Lycidas"

It is often said that "Lycidas" is a poem long admired. But I say that "Lycidas" is a poem long abused. The abuses take a variety of forms and involve a wide range of complexity. By 'abuses' I am not referring to ad hominem attacks. When John Crowe Ransom attempts to interpret "Lycidas" in terms of a Puritan zealot who is "angry, violent, and perhaps a little bit vulgar", or when Robert Graves call Milton a monster and a renegade and concludes that "Lycidas" is a "poem strangled by art", I consider it beneath the dignity of the literary critic to offer a refutation. By 'abuses' I mean those erroneous interpretations resulting either from fallacious reasoning or from false assumptions. For it is an obvious truth that "a poem, which looks so fixed and determinate on the printed page, is in fact a variable, dependent in a high degree not only on the "taste", but on the rational premises, categories, and criteria of a given critic, as well as his tact, intelligence, and the range of pertinent historical knowledge he can bring to bear."

8 Graves, p. 323.
The 'abuse' which I find most frequently practiced against "Lycidas" today is the one endorsed by the so-called New Critics. While these critics embrace a diversity of methods, they invariably begin with one common assumption, derived from a partial reading of Matthew Arnold: that the function of criticism is "to see the object as in itself it really is"; and correlativelly, that a work of literature contains within itself everything needed for its interpretation and will yield its complete and unequivocal meaning to any critic who will approach it with a disinterested spirit, unencumbered by historical considerations. Had these critics read Matthew Arnold with more diligence they would have seen that he said, as an extension of the above statement, that "for the creation of a masterpiece of literature two powers must concur, the power of the man and the power of the moment, and the man is not enough without the moment." What Arnold meant by "the power of the moment" was the cumulative forces of tradition, "a current of ideas in the highest degree animating and nourishing to the creative power."

For, as Arnold never tired of saying, "the creation of a modern poet, to be worth much, implies a great critical

11 Arnold, p. 453.
12 Arnold, p. 454.
effort behind it." Furthermore, the practice of criticism, "real criticism ... obeys an instinct prompting it to try to know the best that is known and thought in the world ... and to value knowledge and thought as they approach the best." It is clear, then, that Arnold's theory of criticism rests upon two basic assertions. First, the intelligent use of tradition helps both to inform the artist of what is valuable and also to assist him in the active process of attaining it. Second, what is needed in criticism is a general sense of the continuity of tradition, a realization of what qualities and approaches have continued to have the most vital and lasting effects. Therefore, in selecting Arnold as their critical authority, the New Critics have succeeded, not only in an erroneous identification, but also in contradicting their basic critical tenet.

Cleanth Brooks and John Hardy, in a collaborative essay on "Lycidas", typify the critical approach of the so-called New Critics. Their essay demonstrates all of the major fallacies which these critics habitually commit. I shall take Brooks and Hardy severely to task for four reasons. First, these critics have considerable prestige in the academic community and they frequently appear as recommended reading for

13 Arnold, p. 454.
14 Arnold, p. 457.
college undergraduates. Second, the number of fallacies which they commit is large. Third, the fallacies are prevalent in contemporary criticism and often are not recognized as such. Fourth, any critic must come to terms with these fallacies if he desires a valid interpretation of the poem.

Brooks and Hardy begin their analysis of "Lycidas" with two syllogisms. In each syllogism, however, while the major premise is true, the minor premise is false. It follows, therefore, that their conclusions must be false also. Brooks and Hardy state that "if we are to explore the poem, we must be prepared to become acquainted with its architecture." This is a true statement and, one must add, especially relevant when examining such a complex genre as the pastoral elegy. These authors also state that while it is necessary to take certain conventions into account when reading "Lycidas," "the poem does not lean unduly upon them." This is a false statement. There is, perhaps, no other short poem in the whole of English literature in which it is so absolutely necessary to take into account the conventions which went into the subtle and intricate architecture of the poem. I do not say that the core, or central poetic experience, of "Lycidas" can be reduced to a set of literary conventions; I can not agree with G. Wilson Knight when he writes that "Lycidas" "is an accumulation of magnificent fragments." What I do say is that an accurate knowledge of the many conventions in "Lycidas" is
indispensable; indeed, it is the major precondition for understanding the poem. Moreover, without the structural support of its conventions “Lycidas” would collapse under the strain of its own majestic weight. The literary conventions are the determining factor between form and chaos.

The second syllogism, which these authors offer, begins with the statement that “the ‘poetry’ resides in the total structure of meanings.” There is no doubt that this is a true statement. However, Brooks and Hardy go on to state that the primary component of this “structure of meanings” is the imagery. The authors make the ‘startling’ discovery – one they feel has previously gone unobserved – that “Milton is a symbolist poet to a considerable extent.” Rather than state the truth or falsity of this statement, let me pursue this line of reasoning and see what conclusions can be drawn about the poem.

Brooks and Hardy begin their interpretation of the imagery with lines twelve to fourteen of the poem:

   He must not float upon his wat’ry bier
   Unwept, and welter to the parching wind,
   Without the meed of some melodious tear.

These authors see in this passage the ‘startling’ paradox that the “tear” which is the “meed” given to Lycidas by the poet is the same substance (salt water) as the “wat’ry bier”, the sea on which the body “welters.” Moreover, as the poem develops, the “melodious tear”

---

18 Brooks and Hardy, p. 171.
19 Brooks and Hardy, p. 250.
comes to assume greater and greater significance, until it reaches the gigantic proportions of overwhelming the "sounding Seas":

The contrast between the salt water of the immensity of the sea and the salt water of the melodious tear may not seem to be of much importance; but as the poem develops it comes to mean a great deal. The "melodious tear" promises to overwhelm the "sounding Sea". Even at this point one can see something of the complexity of the symbol....

Not only does the "tear" come from the "sacred well" of the muses and flow through a profusion of rivers and streams in richly ambiguous contrasts and ironies, but also it becomes the vehicle of the "resurrection images" at the end of the poem. For Brooks and Hardy, the "melodious tear" has become the whole elegy. The conclusion which these authors reach is now fairly obvious:

We must see, in short, that "Lycidas" is a good poem not because it is appropriately and simply pastoral and elegiac ... but because of its unique formal whole-ness, because of the rich "integrity" of even such a single figure as that in the lines "He must not flote upon his watry bear/Unwept, and welter to the parching wind/Without the meed of some melodious tear". The several elements involved here are conventional, even commonplace, in pastoral elegy....But the point is that one cannot consider them severally. They are woven inextricably together in the single, apparently simple figure. The rhyme of "bier" and "tear" seems, at first glance, merely hackneyed. But it is justified and enriched by the fact that the bier is the water itself -- by the paradox ... that the "meed" ... is also water; and in the full context of the poem, the redeeming agent, the melodious tear, is of the same substance as the agent which brought about Lycidas's death.

---

21 Brooks and Hardy, p. 172.
22 Brooks and Hardy, p. 178.
23 Brooks and Hardy, pp. 259-60.
And:

... the tear is made a song, "melodious" so that the identification of the acts of mourning and of composing the poem is firmly established ... anticipating the conclusion of the poem in which the rebirth by water is effected.

24

Finally:

... the mechanical structure of the line is perfectly adjusted to the metaphor, made inseparably a part of the total effect -- the alliteration of "watry", "wept", "welter", and "wind", of "meed" and "melodious", emphasizing the key words, and leading inevitably to the concluding rhyme word "tear".

25

Under the critical scrutiny of Brooks and Hardy, it would appear that "Lycidas" is not about King, nor Milton, nor grief, but images of water. That such a conclusion is untenable -- even absurd -- need hardly be stated; it illustrates the fallacy of pursuing a false premise to its logical conclusion; it demonstrates inaccurate and illogical reasoning. No amount of clever manipulation and dexterous juggling of symbols can demonstrate, as Brooks and Hardy would have us believe, that "Milton is a symbolist poet." Furthermore, there are alternative interpretations of certain symbols in the poem; Brooks and Hardy ignore this possibility. For example, they conclude that the sea in "Lycidas" is a symbol of death, confusion, and oblivion:

24 Brooks and Hardy, p. 260.
25 Brooks and Hardy, p. 260.
In this poem, for obvious reasons, the sea is associated with death -- the death of King, and also with the death of Orpheus. But, in relation to the theme of fate as announced in the earlier sections of the poem, it is associated with a kind of aimless confusion, type of nameless oblivion in which the known and familiar human world is swallowed up.

However, an alternative interpretation can be readily provided. It can be argued with equal plausibility that the sea in "Lycidas" is a symbol of life, hope, and resurrection. The following passage from the poem abundantly supports this interpretation of the sea:

   Weep no more, woeful Shepherds weep no more,  
For 'Lycidas' your sorrow is not dead,  
Sunk though he be beneath the wat'ry floor,  
So sinks the day-star in the Ocean bed,  
And yet anon repairs his drooping head,  
And tricks his beams, and with new-spangled Ore,  
Flames in the forehead of the morning sky:  
So 'Lycidas', sunk low, but mounted high,  
Through the dear might of him that walk'd the waves,  
Where other groves, and other streams along,  
With 'Nectar' pure his oozy Locks he laves,  
And hears the unexpressive nuptial Song,  
In the blest Kingdom meek of joy and love.

Therefore, if it can be shown that a specific item in a poem can symbolize two sets of opposite qualities or states of being, it can not be used as evidence to support a specific theme unless it includes both sets of qualities.

Brooks and Hardy, however, do not stop at this point in their analysis. Instead, they introduce a

---
26 Brooks and Hardy, p. 178.
27 "Lycidas", lines 165-177.
distinction between the ostensible meaning of the poem and
the real meaning. It turns out that the images are only
the ostensible meaning. To find the real meaning of the
poem one must look for "certain dominant, recurrent,
symbolic motives in the structure of the imagery." For
the sake of simplicity, the authors call these "dominant,
 recurrent, symbolic motives" themes. What, then, is the
real meaning of "Lycidas"? Brooks and Hardy give the
following answer:

...what counts in the poem is not Edward King as
an individual but rather what King stands for, the
young poet and pastor. But if Milton is not deeply
concerned with King as a person, he is deeply con-
cerned, and as a young poet personally involved, with
a theme -- which is that of the place and meaning of
poetry in a world which seems at many points inimical
to it .... It is this theme that dominates the poem,
and a variant of it -- the relation of the poet to
the forces of nature -- which shapes the first
paragraphs.

When one reads the above statement, two questions
immediately spring to mind. Are the two themes accurate
statements about the poem? Is a poem of such complexity
dominated by only two themes? For the moment, however, let
us leave aside the validity of assuming that "Lycidas"
is a "symbolist poem" of which the "real subject" is a
"theme". Let us look at the evidence which Brooks and
Hardy offer in support of their thesis that the central
theme in "Lycidas" is "the place and meaning of poetry
in a world which seems at many points inimical to it."

28 Brooks and Hardy, p. 256.
29 Brooks and Hardy, p. 172.
The first indication of this theme, Brooks and Hardy argue, appears in the passage which begins on line fifteen of the poem:

Begin then, Sisters of the sacred well,
That from beneath the seat of 'Jove' doth spring,
Begin, and somewhat loudly sweep the string.
Hence with denial vain, and coy excuse,
So may some gentle Muse
With lucky words favor my destin'd Urn....

The argument which Brooks and Hardy construct from this passage is astounding to say the least:

Immediately after the reference to the "melodious tear" the speaker invokes the "Sisters of the sacred well". Is the tear wept by the sorrowing speaker? Or since it is "melodious", is it drawn from the well of the Muses? Or is it wept by the Muses themselves? The ambiguity is not a meaningless one: the primary matter is the relation of the poet to the Muses ....

To ask whether the "melodious tear" is drawn from the well of the muses or wept by the muses themselves is not only a pointless question, it is absurd. There is no doubt that the passage from the poem, quoted above, does signal "the relation of the poet to the Muses", but to contend that the passage contains a "meaningful ambiguity" is to mistake the significance of a literary convention which dates from Theocritus' "Idyl I". When Milton offers an invocation to the muse, he merely locates the poem within a long line of elegiac utterances. He is not, as Brooks

30 "Lycidas", lines 15-20.
31 Brooks and Hardy, pp. 172-3.
and Hardy would have us believe, asking "the question whether the Muse has any existence apart from the poet himself." To attempt to find a "meaningful ambiguity" in a conventional invocation is to needlessly complicate the author's intentions.

The next item of evidence which Brooks and Hardy offer in support of their thesis hinges upon their discovery that the nymphs "are not to be blamed for failing to protect Lycidas since 'the Muse herself that Orpheus bore' could not protect her son":

On the day of Lycidas' death the nymphs were not playing where one would have expected them to play. The speaker knows this -- because, had they been there, they would surely have tried to save Lycidas. Calliope is mentioned simply to emphasize that deeper pessimism into which the elegist falls at this point -- not only were the nymphs absent; even had they been present they would have been ineffectual, as the Muse herself (of a higher order, yet of the same kind) was powerless to save her son.

The point which Brooks and Hardy feel they must drive home is that "all the divine guardians of the classical tradition -- from the highest and most remote, the Muse herself, to the lowest and most intimate, the nymphs --appear to be ineffectual." To corroborate this point, the authors explain that the exclamation which is line fifty-six of the poem, "Ay me I fondly dream!", means that "the existence of the nymphs or their effectuality is a 'fond dream.'"

32 Brooks and Hardy, p. 173.
33 Brooks and Hardy, p. 173.
34 Brooks and Hardy, p. 174.
35 Brooks and Hardy, p. 174.
36 Brooks and Hardy, p. 174.
Finally, Brooks and Hardy conclude that the nymphs do not exist:

... to say nymphs are ineffectual is tantamount to denying their existence. The poet enjoys no special status. The old intimate relation between the poet and the forces of nature has lapsed -- if it ever existed, save as a fable of some early and lost golden age.

This argument can be summarized in one succinct statement: since the muse and the nymphs could not save Lycidas, the poet has called into question the efficacy of his "melodious tear"; divine nature has been divested of any special sanctity and the poet has been divested of any special function. "Is the tear, after all, other than the waste salt water which it resembles and on the waves of which the body of the dead poet now welters?" To further support this argument, Brooks and Hardy turn to an examination of the following stanza:

But O the heavy change, now thou art gone,
Now thou art gone, and never must return;
Thee Shepherd, thee the Woods, and desert Caves,
With wild Thyme and the gadding Vine o’ergrown,
And all their echoes mourn.
The Willows and the Hazel Copse green
Shall now no more be seen,
Fanning their joyous Leaves to thy soft lays.
As killing as the Canker to the Rose,
Or Taint-worm to the weanling Herbs that graze,
Or Frost to Flowers, that their gay wardrobe wear,
When first the White-thorn blows;
Such, 'Lycidas' thy loss to Shepherd’s ear.

37 Brooks and Hardy, p. 174.
38 Brooks and Hardy, p. 175.
39 "Lycidas", lines 37-49.
To Brooks and Hardy this passage indicates "a loss of the sense of nature's sympathy." They argue that in this stanza "we are presented with an emptied nature, a nature which allows us to personify it only in the sense that it sounds seem mournful." Finally, they conclude that "The change which the death of Lycidas has brought is not actually a change in nature herself; the death is not a loss to nature, but a numbing of the poet's sensitivity to nature." Brooks and Hardy see a direct comparison between what happens to the sheep when the taint-worm attacks them and what has happened to the poet's ear:

... it is the same sort of thing that happens to the sheep when the taint-worm attacks them or that happens to early flowers cut off by a late frost. It is as though the shepherd in his grief, though he still calls himself "Shepherd", sees himself reduced to the level of his charges, the sheep themselves, in his relation to the forces of nature. In the elegist's compliment, Lycidas is made a kind of shepherd to him, without whom now he is abandoned and helpless. Nature is no more sympathetic with him in his sorrow than it would be with the sheep if their keeper should die and leave them to fend for themselves. Nature has no apparent respect for the memory of Lycidas. And it is questionable whether she had any for him alive.

I cannot accept the interpretation of this stanza, which Brooks and Hardy offer, for one simple and obvious reason: it is contrary to what is stated in the stanza. Rather than present an "emptied nature" which "has no apparent respect for the memory of Lycidas", this stanza presents an

---

40 Brooks and Hardy, p. 175.
41 Brooks and Hardy, p. 175.
42 Brooks and Hardy, p. 176.
43 Brooks and Hardy, p. 176.
effulgent nature which has responded with "joyous Leaves" to his poetic song:

The Willows and the Hazel Copses green
Shall now no more be seen,
Fanning their joyous Leaves to thy soft lays.  

Moreover, this stanza presents an impassioned nature which deeply mourns the poet’s death:

Thee Shepherd, thee the Woods, and desert Caves,
With wild Thyme and the gadding Vine o’ergrown,
And all their echoes mourn.  

Taken as a whole, the stanza convinces us that "Universal nature did lament" the death of Lycidas. There is simply no evidence within the stanza to support the thesis that nature is "empty" and has no respect for the memory of Lycidas. Had Brooks and Hardy argued that Milton was indulging in "that willing suspension of disbelief, which constitutes poetic faith", or that he was practising the poetic fiction of the pathetic fallacy, they could have built up a plausible argument. But they do not invoke either of these postulations. Instead, they stubbornly insist that nature is empty and neutral, that the poet is helpless and abandoned.

The next stanza in the poem is treated in a similar fashion:

44 "Lycidas", lines 42-44.
45 "Lycidas", lines 39-41.
46 "Lycidas", line 60.
... the passage, including again its reference to the fate of Orpheus, also reads as a dark commentary on any hopeful view of the relation of the poet to nature. The poet enjoys no special status. To judge by the fate of either Lycidas or Orpheus, the poet’s name is literally written in water. 47

Again, the same charge must be brought against Brooks and Hardy: there is no evidence to support their thesis. If Orpheus "enjoys no special status", why does Milton refer to him as the "enchanting son/ Whom Universal nature did lament"? 48a Furthermore, to conclude that "the poet’s name is literally written in water" is to read the stanza out of context. There is an obvious and intended relationship between this stanza and the later one which tells us that the poet "suck low, but mounted high" to heaven where:

... entertain him all the Saints above,
In solemn troops, and sweet Societies
That sing, and singing in their glory move,
And wipe the tears for ever from his eyes. 49

Far from having his name "written in water", it appears that the poet’s name is written in nothing less than gold. It is clear, then, that Brooks and Hardy can support their thesis only by lifting certain statements out of context.

We can now arrive at a final judgment about the validity of assuming that "Lycidas" is a symbolist poem of which the "real meaning" is two themes. When the imagery was taken as the chief component of the poem, we saw that

47 Brooks and Hardy, p.176.
48a "Lycidas", lines 59-60.
48b "Lycidas", line 172.
49 "Lycidas", lines 178-81.
such an analysis led into a blind alley; the poem became an elegy, not about King, nor Milton, nor grief, but about water. This forced Brooks and Hardy into an awkward distinction between the “ostensible meaning” and the “real meaning” of “Lycidas”. Moreover, we saw that some of the items in the poem which Brooks and Hardy interpreted as images and symbols were self-contradictory. Finally, we saw that the two themes which Brooks and Hardy designate as the “real meaning” of the poem are not accurate statements about the poem. There is no evidence to support the thesis that the “real meaning” of “Lycidas” is “the place and meaning of poetry in a world which seems at many points inimical to it.” Furthermore, there is no evidence to support the correlative thesis that the “real meaning” of “Lycidas” is “the relation of the poet to the forces of nature.”

Brooks and Hardy fail in their synthesis of the poem because they emphasize content to the exclusion of form: they do not always distinguish between what is said and how it is said; they commit, what I shall designate, the formalist fallacy. In addition, they are too selective in their choice of the structural components of the poem; the architecture of the poem is more complex than they assume.
Fallacies of the Type Two Approach to "Lycidas"

Under the influence of T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land", J. G. Frazer's The Golden Bough, and C. G. Jung's psychology of the "collective unconscious", together with a growing interest in comparative literature and comparative anthropology, a new approach to "Lycidas" arose. What Eliot, Frazer, and Jung have in common is, of course, a fervid interest in archetypal patterns, or as they are more commonly termed, myths and folklore. This mode of criticism is really a refinement of the approach which I have just examined. However, it is sufficiently different to warrant a separate treatment. It places an altogether different emphasis upon the selection, grouping and interpretation of the imagery within the poem. More important, however, is the fact that this mode of criticism goes outside the poem in order to arrive at an interpretation of the poem. Unlike the previous approach, it does not assume that the poem is a separate entity which "contains within itself everything needed for its interpretation and will yield its complete and unequivocal meaning to any critic who will approach it with a disinterested spirit, unencumbered by historical considerations." On the contrary, this approach assumes that the critic must be, not only historically enlightened, but also culturally
sophisticated. Indeed, this approach declares that the more cultures, particularly ancient ones, the critic is familiar with, the better his critical performance. It is clear, then, that the emphasis in this approach is different from that of the previous one and warrants a separate treatment.

The structural principle which establishes the unity and meaning of "Lycidas", according to this approach, is not imagery or themes, as in the previous approach, but archetypal patterns. The adherents of this literary stratagem assume that "Analogies between the conventions of fertility ritual and those of pastoral elegy are numerous and obvious, and some of them at least clearly seen by Milton, who used them to reinforce the imagery of 'Lycidas'." When the poem is examined in this light, the result is "a remarkably tight amalgam of death-and-rebirth imagery, drawn from a more than catholic variety of sources." However, the primary source of the death and rebirth archetype is the Hellenistic world of the third century B.C., in which "the most popular solutions of the problems of death were expressed in the rituals of various fertility cults."

51 Adams, p. 184.
52 Adams, p. 184.
The critics who assume this critical stance point to Milton's general familiarity with fertility cults. References to Ashtaroth, Thammuz, Isis, and Osiris appear in the "Nativity Ode" and to Adonis in "Comus" and to Amaranthus in Paradise Lost and to Alpheus and Arethusa in "Arcades". These references are given as evidence for the tacit assumption that Milton generally thought in terms of the death and rebirth archetype. "Lycidas" afforded Milton a golden opportunity because the subject matter was so admirably suited to the dramatization of this archetype. "The fact that King died by drowning perhaps fortuitously but nonetheless effectively opened up to Milton a much larger range of death-and-rebirth imagery, which he exploited with his usual thoroughness".

Whereas Brooks and Hardy see the opening passage of "Lycidas" as a "rich and meaningful ambiguity" indicative of the poet's relation to the muse, Richard P. Adams, explaining "The Archetypal Pattern of Death and Rebirth in Milton's 'Lycidas'", sees the same passage as a collection of sacred vegetables:

The opening invocation exposes a vein of death-and-rebirth imagery concerned with various forms of vegetation. The laurel, the myrtle, and the ivy are evergreens. Besides being emblems of poetry they are symbols of immortality generally, in contrast

53 Adams, p. 185.
to deciduous plants. All of them have been held sacred to fertility gods and demigods. Adonis, in one version of his myth, was born out of a myrtle tree. The laurel was supposed to have been a sweetheart of Apollo transformed into a tree to escape his pursit. The ivy was sacred to Dionysus. 54

Viewed from this critical perspective, the flower passage in "Lycidas" takes on a new and startlingly different meaning: "In this connection the pathetic fallacy, one of the most persistent of the conventions of pastoral elegy, is no fallacy at all but a perfectly logical aspect of the ritual." The flowers and the other vegetation mentioned throughout the poem become a "perfectly logical aspect" of the death and rebirth archetype for an apparently obvious reason: "The transformation by some deity of a mortal into a plant or flower was a favorite symbol of immortality in the classical myth." References to this fact are scattered throughout the poem. The rose (1.45) sprang from the blood of Adonis; the hyacinth (1.106) sprang from the blood of Amyclae; the violet (1.145) sprang from the blood of Attis; the amaranth (1.149) was a popular symbol of immortality.

It follows from the above statements that the numerous references to water in the poem become, not symbols of death, confusion, and oblivion as Brooks

54 Adams, p. 184.
55 Adams, p. 185.
56 Adams, p. 184.
57 Adams, pp. 184-5.
and Hardy would have us believe, but symbols of fertility. Water was of course a prime symbol of fertility in all the ancient cults, for reasons that Milton seems to recognize in connection with his flowers which grow near 'gushing brooks' ... and which 'suck on honied showres'." Moreover, the water references are "logically" related to the archetype of death and rebirth, "one of the most definite being the legend of Alpheus and Arethuse." It is difficult to know what Adams means by the "most definite" because the Alpheus and Arethuse legend is mentioned only once in the poem and is limited to a single line: "Return Alpheus, the dread voice is past." If Milton had intended this legend as the "most definite" connection between the imagery and the archetypal pattern, he would surely have given it more space. The second illustration which Adams offers is only slightly more convincing. The references to St. Peter as "The Pilot of the Galilean lake" emphasizes the pattern of death and rebirth in two specific connections, the story of Peter's walk on the water, beginning to sink and being raised by Christ, and the fact that he was the keeper of the keys.

The archetypal approach arrives at a new interpretation.

58 Adams, p. 185.
59 Adams, p. 185.
60a "Lycidas", l. 132.
60b Adams, p. 186.
of who is to blame for the death of Lycidas. Since water is a symbol of fertility, it must be some other agent who is responsible for his death:

Milton goes to some length to show that water, the principle of life, is not responsible for the death of Lycidas. Triton ("the Herald of the Sea," 1.96) testifies that the winds were at home and that the Nereids ("Sleek Panope with all her sisters," 1.99) were attending to their duty as protectresses of ships and sailors. The blame is put finally on the man-made ship which, in defiance of the powers of nature, had been "Built in the eclipse, and rigg'd with curses dark" (1.101).

Other critics of "Lycidas" have not concerned themselves with the decision of whether to blame the ship or the sea for the death of Lycidas. But Adams has backed himself into an inconsistency; the sea cannot be a symbol of fertility and, at the same time, an agent of death.

Even the sun is recruited as an aspect of the archetypal pattern: "The descent into and re-emergence from water is specifically related by Milton to the setting and rising of the sun as a symbol of death and rebirth." The following passage from the poem is offered as evidence of the sun's archetypal significance:

Weep no more, woeful Shepherds weep no more,
For 'Lycidas' your sorrow is not dead,
Sunk though he be beneath the wat'ry floor,
So sinks the day-star in the Ocean bed,
And yet anon repairs his drooping head,
And tricks his beams, and with new-spangled Ore,
Flames in the forehead of the morning sky:
So 'Lycidas', sunk low, but mounted high,
Through the dear might of him that walk'd the waves....

61 Adams, p. 186.
63 "Lycidas", 11. 165-73.
Adams' comment upon this passage is curious to say the least:

Besides respecifying and reinforcing the reference to St. Peter's adventure (1.109) this passage coordinates two accounts of the sun's journey from rising to setting. The first of these represents in parallel the life of the two friends at Cambridge (ll. 25-31), and the second represents the life of the surviving poet ....

It might be pointed out to Richard Adams that St. Peter hardly needs "reinforcing", not to mention "respecifying". In addition, I fail to see the evidence in this passage which "represents in parallel the life of the two friends at Cambridge."

Another improbable conclusion is reached when Adams draws a parallel between the death of Lycidas and the dragon-fight theme of North European mythology:

For some reason the descent into water which if often a feature of death-and-rebirth cycles is, if not often, at least sometimes associated with the dragon-fight theme, especially in North European mythology. Beowulf's fight with Grendel's mother in the cave under the mere is perhaps the most familiar example. Milton did not know Beowulf, but he paralleled the incident in "Lycidas" ....

The following passage from the poem is offered in support of this parallel:

64 Adams, p. 187.
65 Adams, p. 186.
Where thou perhaps under the whelming tide
Visit'st the bottom of the monstrous world:
Or whether thou to our moist vows denied,
Sleep'st by the fable of "Bellerus" old,
Where the great vision of the guarded Mount
Looks toward "Namancos" and "Bayona's" hold....

Adams claims that "The parallel is complete if the word "monstrous" is interpreted to mean "full of monsters"."
But such an interpretation, I submit, exceeds the bounds of plausibility; it is too great a stretch of the imagination. Nor is Adams content with finding only one dragon-fight parallel:

There is no uncertainty about the references to Corineus, the slayer of Gogmagog, and to St. Michael, the dragon fighter par excellence of Christian tradition.

Such allusions would be consistent with medieval allegory, but they are not consistent with Milton.

Finally, the Orpheus legend sums up the interrelated elements of the fertility cults and the tradition of the pastoral elegy:

The death of Orpheus at the hands of the Bacchanals, his dismemberment, and the journey of his head to Lesbos are the things that occupy Milton's attention first. The parallels between this event and the deaths of Adonis, Attis, Osiris, and other fertility demigods have been pointed out by modern scholars. The facts that he was a singer, i.e., a poet, that he died a violent death, that his head was thrown into the water, and that his mother Calliope, the muse of epic poetry, mourned his death made him sufficiently adaptable to the general pattern of pastoral elegy and to Milton's treatment.

---

67 Adams, p. 186.
68 Adams, p. 186.
69 Adams, p. 188.
Nor is Adams alone in his final judgment about the poem. The distinguished critic, Northrop Frye, has drawn a similar conclusion: "Poetry demands, as Milton saw it, that the elements of his theme should be assimilated to their archetypes... Hence the poem will not be about King, but about his archetype, Adonis, the dying and rising god, called Lycidas in Milton's poem."

It is now time to ask wherein lies the fallacy of this critical approach? It is simply this: the archetypal pattern is an artifact of the critical procedure employed. The critics selects a number of images and symbols and groups them into a thematic scheme which is independent of the context in which they originally occurred. With the removal of the qualifications and restrictions which their context imposed, the images and symbols take on a new and extended significance. The result is a set of disembodied images and symbols strung into a thematic pattern which bears only a distorted resemblance to the poem as a whole. "Lycidas" is not about Adonis, or Orpheus, because Adonis is never mentioned in the poem and Orpheus is mentioned only once, as an allusion reinforcing the despair of the poet. By equating the Christian story with a set of pagan archetypes, the dramatic force of the poem

is reduced to the scholastic endeavour of an anthropological tract, and the poem is left without a denouement; it becomes a series of passages reiterating the same idea. The only virtue in this approach lies in its attempt to synthesize the pagan and Christian elements in the poem. But this is never done with adequate thoroughness. Besides, Milton was a devout Christian. No amount of persuasion could convince him that the Christ story was just another version of an archetypal myth.
Fallacies of the Type Three Approach to "Lycidas"

The third approach to "Lycidas" is radically different from the previous two. This approach was initiated by a number of men who are distinguished poets as well as literary critics. This group includes such outstanding figures as Robert Graves, John Crowe Ransom, and T.S. Eliot. The unique feature of this approach is the initial assumption which these critics have in common: that "Lycidas" was written, not by a polished and established poet, but by "an apprentice of nearly thirty, who was still purifying his taste upon an astonishingly arduous diet of literary exercises." While these critics agree that "Lycidas" is "for the most part a work of great art", they see the poem as "artful and tricky" and declare that "We are disturbingly conscious of a man behind the artist." Their final judgment is that Milton "mourns with a technical piety", and the whole poem is essentially "an exercise in pure linguistic technique, or metrics; it was also an exercise in the technique of what our critics of fiction refer to as 'point of view'." Let us now look at the kinds of evidence which are marshalled in support of this type of critical approach.

72 Ransom, p. 238.
73 Ransom, p. 238.
74 Ransom, p. 238.
75 Ransom, p. 228.
76 Ransom, p. 227.
For John Crowe Ransom, "'Lycidas' is a literary exercise"; it is a poem in which "the craftsmanship, the formal quality which is written on it, is meant to have high visibility." In support of this judgment, Ransom mentions that "Lycidas" first appeared without a title and signed only by a pair of initials; it was merely one of a number of "exhibits in a memorial garland, a common academic sort of volume." Moreover, Milton had been paractising since adolescence on every fresh corpse in sight, from the university beadle to the fair infant dying of a cough:

As for memorial verse, he had already written, in English or Latin, for University beadle, the University carrier, the Vice-Chancellor, his niece the Fair Infant Dying of a Cough, the Marchioness of Winchester, the Bishop of Winchester, the Bishop of Ely .... All these poems are exercises, and some are very playful indeed.

What, then, did Milton do when he wrote "Lycidas"?

According to Ransom, he made "a very free adaptation of the canzone" which he employed with "almost destructive freedom"; for it was Milton's habit of mind to take an historic metrical pattern and experiment with the liberties he could take with it:

77 Ransom, p. 227.
78 Ransom, p. 227.
79 Ransom, p. 225.
80 Ransom, pp. 227-8.
81 Ransom, p. 229.
82 Ransom, p. 229.
For he does not cut patterns out of the whole cloth, but always takes an existing pattern; stretches it dangerously close to the limits that the pattern will permit without ceasing to be a pattern; and never brings himself to the point of defying that restraint which patterns inflict upon him, and composing something altogether unpatterned.

At the same time, however, Ransom points out that the stanzas in "Lycidas" are exactly uniform: "we must observe the loving exactitude of his line-structure, that fundamental unit of any prosody, within the stanzas. He counts his syllables, he takes no liberties there: consisting with our rather fixed impression that he scarcely knew how in all his poetry to admit an imperfect line." What, then, does Ransom mean when he says that Milton employed the traditional form of the Italian canzone with "almost destructive freedom?" By his own admission, Ransom tells us that he cannot read Italian. How, then, can he provide substantial evidence for his sweeping generalization that Milton stretches a traditional from "dangerously close to the limit that the pattern will permit without ceasing to be a pattern?" Ransom does this by a sleight of hand explanation:

Milton knew his Italian. But he also knew his Spenser, and knowing that, it seems unnecessary to inquire whether he knew his Italian too; for he had only to adapt a famous Spenserian stanza, and his acquaintance with the canzone becomes really immaterial.

83 Ransom, p. 228.
84 Ransom, p. 229.
85 Ransom, p. 229.
But how accurately did Spenser transcribe the Italian canzone? What innovations did Spenser add to the established form? Can we safely assume that Milton’s acquaintance with Spenser made his acquaintance with the canzone immaterial? To these questions Ransom does not give a satisfactory answer. Instead, he merely states that in Spenser’s “Epithalamion”, the poet varied the number of lines in a stanza by three whole lines. From this small amount of evidence Ransom concludes that “The enterprising Spenser prepared the way for the daring Milton, who marks the liberties which his celebrated exemplar has taken and carries his own liberties further, to a point just this side of anarchy”.

We must now ask what liberties did Milton take with the canzone? Is there sufficient evidence to justify Ransom’s rather strong assertion that Milton carried these liberties “to a point just this side of anarchy?” Ransom’s answer is that the eleven stanzas in “Lycidas” “are grossly unequal and unlike. Such stanzas are not in strictness stanzas at all; Milton has all but scrapped the stanza in its proper sense as a formal and binding element.” In addition, Ransom finds “an even more startling lapse” within the poem. Among the 193 lines

---

86 Ransom, p. 230.
87 Ransom, p. 230.
88 Ransom, p. 230.
in "Lycidas" "are ten lines which do not rhyme at all, and which technically do not belong therefore in any stanza, nor in the poem." Furthermore, Milton consciously intended the reader to notice the unrhymed lines. "The opening line of the poem is unrhymed, which is fair warning. The ten unrhymed lines should be conspicuous among the 183 rhymed ones, like so many bachelors at a picnic of fast-mated families." What, then, did Milton intend by his inclusion of ten unrhymed lines? Ransom's answer is that the unrhymed lines "constitute the gesture of his rebellion against the formalism of his art, but not the rebellion itself":

They are defiances, showing the man unwilling to give way to the poet; they are not based upon a special issue but upon surliness, and general principles. It is a fateful moment. At this critical stage in the poet's career, when he has come to the end of the period of Minor Poems, and is turning over in his head the grand subjects out of which he will produce great poems, he is uneasy, sceptical, about the whole foundation of poetry as an art. He has a lordly contempt for its tedious formalities, and is determined to show what he can do with only half trying to attend to them.

Nor is Ransom content with interpretation the apparent irregularities in the poem as rebellious gestures. He goes further: "I venture to think that just such a practice, speaking very broadly, obtained in the composition of "Lycidas"; that it was written smooth and rewritten rough; which was treason." The reason

89 Ransom, p. 230.
90 Ransom, p. 230.
91 Ransom, p. 231.
92 Ransom, p. 231.
93 Ransom, p. 231.
this constitutes an act of "treason" is that "Anonymity, of some real if not literal sort, is a condition of poetry. A good poem, even if it is signed with a full and well-known name, intends as a work of art to lose the identity of the author." Therefore, since the reader is "disturbingly conscious of a man behind the artist", and since the artist, himself, is "artful and tricky", "Lycidas" violates the critical tenet of anonymity; the poem, for Ranson, is clearly treasonous.

To refute Ransom's entire argument, it is necessary to return to the initial point which he so glibly dismisses. It is not true that Milton's acquaintance with the Spenserian stanza makes his acquaintance with the Italian canzone immaterial. As F.T. Prince has pointed out, "'Lycidas' cannot be dissected without a knowledge of the Italian poetry of the sixteenth century"; and, more specifically, as W.P. Ker has stated, "you cannot fully understand ... "Lycidas" without going back to Italy and the theory and practice of the canzone." There is every indication that Milton was "well acquainted with the liberation of some Italian lyric verse from stanzaic form which took place in the latter half of the sixteenth century":

Milton's first and clearest impression of it would have come from two works, Tasso's Aminta

94 Ransom, p. 226.
96 Prince, p. 72.
97 Prince, p. 73.
and Guarini's *Il Pastor Fido*. Tasso's famous pastoral drama must have established the use, for certain purposes, of such irregularly rhymed passages, though it seems that his father Bernardo had experimented with such forms in eclogues and some other elaborate poems. Guarini developed this feature of *Aminta* with great success; among his choruses are to be found, several examples of a sustained improvised pattern of rhymes. From this type of irregular lyric, and from the partially rhymed semi-lyrical passages of dialogue found both in *Aminta* and *Il Pastor Fido*, Milton would have seen the possibilities of this liberation of the canzone for dramatic and lyric verse.

Moreover, the final verse-paragraph of eight lines, rhymed like an ottava rima, which Ransom saw as a rebellious breach in the logic of the composition of *"Lycidas"*, corresponds to the commiato in Dante's description of the canzone in *De Vulgari Eloquentia*. The combination of ten-syllable and six-syllable lines in *"Lycidas"* represents the Italian verse harmony described by Dante in the same work. In addition, Milton took advantage of the technical freedom introduced by Sannazaro and Rota; these two Italian authors had "learned how to reproduce the movement of Latin syntax, and this made possible a freer handling of verse-forms." Much of the grammar, diction, and modulation of the flow of the verse in *"Lycidas"* owe their attractiveness to the reproduction of specific Latin effects which Milton learnt from Sannazaro. Rota's unique contribution to the

98 Prince, pp. 73-4.
99 ~ Prince, pp. 72-3.
100 Prince, p. 75.
'liberation' of the canzone is the replacement of rhymed patterns by diction as the chief element in the structure of the stanza:

His chief effort is directed towards making a new adjustment between Italian verse-forms and Latinate diction; the result is that the still surviving predominance of the rhymed patterns in Sannazaro is here replaced by the predominance of diction as an element of structure. Intricate word-order, carefully sustained repetitions, and lengthy periods tend to relegate rhyme to a secondary position. Such writing is relevant, in however minor a degree, not only to "Lycidas", but to Milton's blank verse.

Moreover, in Rota's eclogues the sense and diction so habitually disregard the limits of the lines and the "stanza" that one gets the impression of reading blank verse. "The only satisfactory way to read Rota's rhymed hendecasyllables is indeed as if they were versi sciolti; the diction is elaborated in such a way as to impose its own movement on the metre." We now see how Milton achieved a "reconciliation between rhymed and fluent elegiac diction." Without these technical advancements, Milton would never have been able to give "Lycidas" its special combination of discipline and freedom:

Two technical experiments -- the attempt to evolve a poetic diction equivalent to that of Virgil, and the attempt to combine the tradition of the canzone with that of the Classical eclogue -- marked Italian pastoral verse in the sixteenth century. In England both these experiments bore fruit in "Lycidas".

101 Prince, p. 79.
102 Prince, p. 79.
103 Prince, p. 79.
104 Prince, p. 81.
105 Prince, p. 81.
To those critics familiar with sixteenth-century Italian poetry, the structure of the stanzas in "Lycidas" has never been a matter of dispute. Milton constructed each stanza according to a precise set of rules, and for each variation in the basic pattern, he followed a well established precedent. The basic pattern of the stanzas in "Lycidas" is clearly drawn in Dante's De Vulgari Eloquentio and Tasso's La Cavalletta:

... the stanza of a canzone is most commonly built of two sections, which are linked by a key line or chiave. Such a stanza was also called a stanza divisa. One or the other of the two parts of such a stanza might also be divided, but not usually both. If the first part was undivided it was called the fronte or brow; if it was divided the subdivisions were called piedi or feet. If the second part of the stanza was undivided it was called the sirima or coda; if divided, the subdivisions were called versi. The first part of a stanza divisa must be linked to the second by a line rhyming with the last line of the first; this line was the chiave or key. The two versi, where these existed, might also be linked by a chiave.

The sense of movement and the characteristics of the rhetoric, deriving from these divisions, give the stanzas in "Lycidas" the same distinctive quality as we find in Milton's sonnets:

The divisions in both sonnet and canzone made possible a kind of rhetoric of rhyme; lines which rhymed had differing weight and emphasis according to their position and function. It is impossible to follow Milton's methods in "Lycidas" without perceiving that he makes use of such a rhetoric of rhyme, combing it and contrasting it with the more usual rhetoric of sentence-structure.

106 Prince, p. 84.
107 Prince, p. 85.
The essential feature of this "rhetoric of rhyme" is the independence of Milton's sentences from the pattern of rhymes; "the ebb and flow of statement, the pauses and new departures, appear to be independent of any necessity but their own." An example from the poem will clarify what is meant by a "rhetoric of rhyme":

Next 'Camus', reverend Sire, went footing slow, a
His Mantle hairy, and his Bonnet sedge, b
Inwrought with figures dim, and on the edge b
Like to that sanquine flower inscrib'd with woe. a
"Ah! Who hath reft"(quoth he)"my dearest pledge?" b
Last came, and last did go, a
The Pilot of the 'Galilean' lake.... c

The strong pause comes at the end of the fifth line, but the sixth line which introduces a new series of rhymes takes its rhyme from the completed statement. What is operating here is not a negative overriding of the rhyme scheme, but a positive principle of articulation: "Milton has in mind the stanza divisa of the canzone: that each new group or series of rhymes must be linked to its predecessor by a key line." In the above example, the sixth line is the "key line" which takes its rhyme from among the first five lines. "The rhetoric of rhyme derived from the canzone has thus proveded Milton with an invaluable instrument -- a

---

108 Prince, p. 85.
110 Prince, p. 86.
type of rhyme which looks both back and forward." In
addition, the use of the occasional six-syllable line
gives the same backward and forward movement:

... they not always rhyme with a previous
longer line (thus looking back), but they
give the impression of a contracted movement
which must be compensated by a full movement
in the next line (which is always of full
length), and they thus look forward. This
effect is most marked when, as in most cases,
these short lines rhyme with the line
immediately preceding them.  

As for the ten unrhymed lines which Ransom felt did not
belong to the poem, Milton had the precedent of Dante's
canzoni. The purpose of these unrhymed lines is to give
the poem a seeming ease and freedom which is the aim of
an art that hides art.

We see, therefore, that John Crowe Ransom's critical
analysis of "Lycidas" has totally missed the mark. Through
an illogical procedure, he has constructed a plausible,
though completely fallacious interpretation of the poem.
It is an erroneous assumption to regard the changes in
the canzone in sixteenth-century Italy as "immaterial"
to the architecture of "Lycidas". It is not true that
Milton "made a very free adaptation of the canzone";
nor did he stretch the formal pattern "dangerously
close to the limits that the pattern will permit without
ceasing to be a pattern"; nor is he composing with
"almost destructive freedom". At no point in the poem

111 Prince, p. 86.
112 Prince, p. 87.
113 Prince, p. 87.
does Milton carry the freedom of the form "to a point just this side of anarchy." Rather than dismiss "the stanza in its proper sense as a formal and binding element," Milton reasserts its importance. Therefore, we can dismiss, as completely lacking in evidence, Ransom's final judgments about the poem: the apparent irregularities in the poem do not "constitute the gestures of his rebellion against the formalism of his art"; the poem was not written smooth and rewritten rough"; finally, rather than constituting an act of "treason", the poem is a supreme act of loyalty. Far from being a mere "apprentice of nearly thirty", Milton has shown himself a mature and highly polished poet.

In fairness to Ransom, it should be pointed out that he has contributed a number of valid and worthwhile insights about the construction of the poem. He has shown that in one particular aspect "Lycidas" is unlike any other pastoral elegy -- an aspect which is, to use Ransom's expression, technically astonishing. Traditionally, the pastoral elegy was either a dramatic monologue by a shepherd or a dialogue by several shepherds. "Lycidas", however, is neither. It begins as a monologue and continues as such until three-quarters of the way through the passage on fame:

114 Ransom, p. 236.
"Comes the blind 'Fury' with th'abhorred shears,/ And  
slits the thin spun life." At this point there is  
an abrupt change in the point of view: "But not the  
praise,"/ 'Phoebus' repli'd, and touch'd my trembling  
ears." Phoebus continues to speak until the end  
of the stanza, "after which the shepherd apologizes  
to his pastoral Muses for the interruption and  
proceeds with his monologue." But again Milton  
changes the point of view: "The narrative breaks  
the monologue several times more, presenting action  
sometimes in the present tense, sometimes in the past.  
And the final stanza gives a pure narrative conclusion  
in the past, without the typographical separateness of  
an epilogue." It is evident that Ranson has put his  
finger on a significant feature of the poem's construction.  
However, the interpretation which Ransom gives to this  
technical feature is at once forced and implausible.  
Ransom argues that "such a break in the logic of  
composition would denote, in another work, an amateurism  
below the level of publication"; therefore, Milton had  
a specific reason for deliberately shifting the point  
of view. Few people, however, will agree with Ransom's  
explanation of what was Milton's reason:

115 "Lycidas", 11. 75-6.
116 "Lycidas", 11. 76-7.
117 Ransom, p. 236.
118 Ransom, p. 236.
119 Ransom, p. 236.
If Milton had respected the rule of composition, he must have appeared as any other author of pastoral elegy, whereas in his disrespect of it he can be the person, the John Milton who is different, and dangerous, and very likely to become famous .... If there is any force in this way of reasoning, we may believe that Milton's bold play with the forms of discourse constitutes simply one more item in his general insubordinacy .... Therefore he lays himself open to the charge of being too cunning, and of overreaching himself; the effect is not heroic but mock-heroic. The excited Milton, breathless and breaking through the logic of composition, is charming at first; but as soon as we are forced to reflect that he counterfeited the excitement, we are pained and let down.

This explanation contains several obvious inadequacies. First, it raises more questions than it answers. If Milton's purpose was to appear "different", why did he select such a tradition-bound genre as the pastoral elegy? Why, in so many instances, did he follow his predecessors so faithfully? If Milton wanted to appear dangerous and insubordinate, the question is raised, dangerous and insubordinate to whom? Can a technical change in the construction of a poem convince anyone that the poet is a dangerous person? Second, this explanation is highly improbable. If Milton's technical change represents a "bold play with the forms of discourse", why has it gone so long unnoticed? If Milton has made any kind of play, it is a subtle one.

Moreover, it seems unlikely that Milton "lays himself open to the charge of being too cunning and of overreaching himself." It is true that Milton was striving for a virtuoso performance for which a certain dexterity and cunning are necessary, but he is hardly too cunning. As for overreaching himself, I believe that Milton reached the point of technical proficiency which allowed him to be dramatically appropriate. If this is true, he can hardly be accused of overreaching himself. Furthermore, when Ransom says that the total effect is "not heroic, but mock-heroic", what does he mean? Does he wish to imply that a direct address by Phoebus is less heroic than an indirect address? I would submit that the contrary is true. By making Phoebus’ statement a direct address, Milton has made it dramatically more appropriate and more forceful; if this is the case, Milton has made the poem more, not less, heroic. Finally, Ransom’s last statement that Milton’s alternation of the point of view “is charming at first; but as soon as we are forced to reflect that he counterfeited the excitement, we are pained and let down.” is ambiguous for two reasons. First, what work of art examined from the viewpoint of a detailed technical analysis does not appear as a counterfeit of the emotions?
Second, why should we be "pained and let down" by the discovery of the technical devices which the author has used to excite us? One if often elated by such a discovery.

T.S. Eliot share many of Ransom's opinions about Milton. Both authors maintain identical views towards Milton's individualism. Ransom's judgment that Milton composed with "destructive freedom" is balanced by Eliot's judgment that Milton's composition represents "original acts of lawlessness." But on two issues Eliot goes beyond Ransom's rather extreme position. First, Eliot maintains that Milton is a great eccentric:

As a poet, Milton seems to me probably the greatest of all eccentric. His work illustrates no general principles of good writing; the only principles of writing that it illustrates are such as are valid only for Milton himself to observe. 121

Second, he believes that Milton can be credited with the "invention of his own poetic language":

In Milton there is always the maximal, never the minimal, alteration of ordinary language. Every distortion of construction, the foreign idiom, the use of a word in a foreign way or with the meaning of the foreign word from which it is derived rather than the accepted meaning in English, every idiosyncrasy is a particular act of violence which Milton has been the first to commit. There is no cliché, no poetic diction in the derogatory sense, but a perpetual sequence of original acts of lawlessness. 123

123 Eliot, p. 320.
Eliot is correct when he says that Milton’s language contains no cliches and many idiosyncrasies; he is equally correct when he says that Milton’s language contains “Every distortion of construction, the foreign idiom, the use of a word in a foreign way or with the meaning of the foreign word from which it is derived rather than the accepted meaning in English”, but he is completely in error when he says that this “illustrates no general principles of good writing; the only principles of writing that it illustrates are such as are valid only for Milton himself to observe.” To say this is to ignore the tradition to which Milton’s language belongs; for, as G.S. Fraser has pointed out, “Clearly, the Doric of pastoral was a highly artificial language, a compound of rustic words, archaic words, ordinary words used with an effect of deliberate simplicity and sometimes coined words used for an effect of quaintness.” Milton cannot be credited with the “invention of his own poetic language” any more than he can be credited with the invention of the pastoral elegy as a literary genre.

Eliot’s contribution to our understanding of Milton follows the same pattern as we encountered

with Ransom: they are a mixture of plausible misinformation and accurate, penetrating insights. Eliot's accurate and outstanding contribution is his observation that Milton's unit of verse construction is not the line, but the verse paragraph:

   It seems to me also that Milton's verse is especially refractory to yielding up its secrets to examination of the single line. For his verse is not formed in this way. It is the period, the sentence and still more the paragraph, that is the unit of Milton's verse; and emphasis on the line structure is the minimum necessary to provide a counter-pattern to the period structure. It is only in the period that the wave-length of Milton's verse is to be found: it is his ability to give a perfect and unique pattern to every paragraph, such that the full beauty of the line is found in its context, and his ability to work in larger musical units than any other poet -- that is to me the most conclusive evidence of Milton's supreme mastery.

   125

This is a meritorious observation. It provides us with a major insight into the construction of "Lycidas"; it gives us a key to unlock the poem's meaning. In addition, this observation provides us with concrete evidence of Milton's poetic greatness: "To be able to control so many words at once is the token of a mind of most exceptional energy."

125 Eliot, p. 324.
126 Eliot, p. 324.
Fallacies of the Type Four Approach to "Lycidas"

After the difficulties encountered in the previous three approaches, the fourth approach to "Lycidas" may be viewed as refreshing in its simplicity: this is the literal approach. Professor David Masson, author of the impressive six volume *Life of John Milton*, is often credited with the initiation and popularization of this approach. But this is not true. Professor Masson's approach to "Lycidas" was entirely different; the entire poem, with one exception, was seen by Masson as allegorical:

The song which opens thus is not, it is to be remembered, the song of Milton speaking in his own person, but of Milton transformed in his imagination, for the time, into a poetic shepherd, bewailing, in the season of autumn, the untimely death of his fellow-shepherd Lycidas. Hence the whole elegy is an allegoric pastoral -- a lyric of lamentation, rendered more shadowy and impersonal by being distanced into the form of a narrative and descriptive phantasy.

When "Lycidas" is viewed as an allegorical poem, "the self-same hill" becomes Cambridge; the joint feeding of the flocks, companionship in study; the "rural ditties" on the "oaten flute", academic iambics and elegies; "old Damaetas", Mr. Chapell; and so on throughout the poem. The one exception is the

128 Masson, p. 611.
satirical passage in which Milton attacks the corrupted clergy: "Milton, in writing it, was led by an obvious suggestion of his theme to give vent to a feeling respecting the state of the Church and the nation, of which his mind at any rate was full." Moreover, Masson mentions that at the time the poem was first published "the outburst, bold as it was, may have seemed ambiguous in the expression. On republishing the poem, however, with his full name, in 1645, Milton left no doubt as to his intention." At that time Milton added the famous heading which ends "And by occasion foretels the ruin of our corrupted Clergy then in their height."

"Lycidas", then, is an "allegoric pastoral" which contains a topical allusion and which is written in the "form of a narrative and descriptive phantasy."

The adherents of the literal approach to "Lycidas" agree with Hanford that "'Lycidas' bears its meaning plainly enough on its face." They see "Lycidas" as containing one or two "minor verbal cruxes" such as the meaning of the "two-handed engine at the door", but they assert that essentially "there has been little room for disagreement regarding its larger features."

129 Masson, p. 615.
130 Masson, p. 615.
131 "Lycidas", Headnote.
133 Hanford, p. 170.
134 Hanford, p. 169.
Under the critical scrutiny of the critics who follow this approach, "Lycidas" remains chiefly an elegiac poem about Edward King, a contemporary of Milton at Christ’s College who was drowned when his ship hit a rock on a calm day in the Irish Sea and sank. According to this interpretation, Milton chose the convention of the pastoral elegy to “de-personalize” and to “idealize” his grief. Milton ends the poem with the traditional consolation of Edward King resurrected in heaven, and finds in this thought the strength to carry on his own life. In two passages, which these critics call digressions, Milton records his personal concern in a "thin fictional disguise". In one of these passages Milton expresses his fear that "th’abhorred shears" may cut him off before he can achieve poetic fame. In the other passages he voices a grim warning to the “corrupted Clergy” of his day.

The literal approach is difficult to refute as an argument per se because it commits no formal fallacy. Rather, it is a matter of one’s philosophy of literature. Is poetry meant to be taken literally? Few critics would agree that a poem is solely a literal statement. Many of Hanford’s statements, however, are open to argument. He states that “Lycidas” “bears its meaning plainly enough on its face.” If this is true, why

---

135 Hanford, p. 167.
136 Hanford, p. 168.
have so many disagreements arisen about its meaning? What is there about the poem that has caused it to fascinate a host of outstanding critics if its meaning can be seen "plainly enough on its face?" Why have so many different approaches to the poem been proposed? The same questions can be asked of Hanford's second statement that "there has been little room for disagreement regarding its larger features." There is, I feel, an obvious rebuttal to Hanford's two statements: even a cursory inspection of the panoply of critical articles which the poem has generated will convince anyone that "Lycidas" does not bear "its meaning plainly enough on its face" and there is much room for disagreement regarding "its larger features."
Fallacies of the Type Five Approach to "Lycidas"

The fifth approach to "Lycidas" sprang up in direct opposition to the previous approach: this is the biographical approach. The adherents of this literary stratagem agree with E.M.W. Tillyard that "Lycidas" is not about Edward King, but about Milton himself: "Fundamentally, 'Lycidas' concerns Milton himself. King is but the excuse for one of Milton's most personal poems." In view of the extraordinary nature of Milton's character, it was inevitable that some critic would propose a biographical approach to the poem. Let us now look at the metamorphosis which "Lycidas" undergoes when it is viewed from this critical perspective.

Tillyard maintains that "Most criticism of 'Lycidas' is off the mark, because it fails to distinguish between the nominal and the real subject, what the poem professes to be about and what it is about." To discover the real, as opposed to the nominal, meaning of the poem Tillyard proposes the following procedure as the initial point in the analysis: "Most readers agree that Milton was not deeply grieved at King's death, as they

138 Tillyard, p. 80.
agree that the poem is great. If it is great, it must contain deep feeling of some sort. What then is this deep feeling all about? There are three ways of discovering an answer to this question. First, there are the general circumstances of the poet. When Milton heard of King's death by drowning, he was planning a trip to Italy by sea. Therefore, Milton felt an analogy between King and himself because of the similarity of their ages, education, and careers:

Milton and King had been at the same college in the same University. Their careers and interests had been similar there. Milton was a poet, King had written verse too. King had made a voyage on the sea, Milton was about to make a voyage. How could Milton have missed the idea that he might make the analogy complete by getting drowned, like King also? At a time when, through plagues and what not, life was less secure than in modern times of peace, Milton, having sacrificed so much to his great ambition, must anyhow, as the time of preparation drew to an end, have dwelt on the thought that it might be all for nothing.

Second, there are the "obvious personal passages" in the poem. "That he (Milton) was at least partly thinking of his own possible fate is made clear by the reference in the first paragraph to his own destined urn and sable shroud." Tillyard has made a slight error; the passage to which he refers occurs in the second paragraph:

Hence with denial vain, and coy excuse,

139 Tillyard, p. 80.
140 Tillyard, p. 81.
141 Tillyard, p. 81.
142 Tillyard, pp. 81-2.
So may some gentle Muse
With lucky words favor my destin'd Urn,
And as he passes turn,
And bid fair peace be to my sable shroud,
For we were nurst upon the self-same hill,
Fed the same flock, by fountain, shade, and rill.  

According to Tillyard, this passage completes the analogy between Milton and King. If Milton drowns, some poet will write an elegy for him just as he is writing one for King. A second "obvious personal passage" is the reference to poetic fame and the blind Fury:

>'Fame' is the spur that the clear spirit doth raise
(That last infirmity of Noble mind)
To scorn delights, and live laborious days;
But the fair Guerdon when we hope to find,
And think to burst out into sudden blaze,
Comes the blind'Fury' with th'abhorred shears,
And slits the thin-spun life.  

This passage, says Tillyard, shows how "agonizingly" the thought of premature death tortures Milton. Third, three-quarters of the poem is egotistical in tone. "Milton begins with characteristic egotism. His first lines do not concern King but his own reluctance to write a poem before he is mature." But Milton is willing to risk "premature poetry" because he may be overcome by premature death. Furthermore, lines 25 to 84 are intensely egotistical.

143 "Lycidas", ll. 18-24.
144 "Lycidas", ll. 70-6.
145 Tillyard, p. 83.
This passage "contains a lament for the death of Lycidas, regret that the Muse could not protect her son, and leads up to the first great cause of pain in Milton's own mind: the risk of death before his great work is completed. What has been the use of all his laborious preparation, his careful chastity, ... if fame, for whose sake he has denied himself, is to escape him, anticipated by death?" Since earthly fame has nothing to do with heavenly fame, it would be "a cruel shame and a wicked waste, if he were to die." Tillyard's final remark on this passage is that we "should note with what consummate skill Milton ... works the subject from King to its climax in himself." Moreover, lines 85 to 131 repeat Milton's egotistical outburst and reveal "the second great cause of mental pain in Milton: his quarrel with contemporary England, typified by the rottenness of the clergy. Thus St. Peter's outburst is not an excrescence but strictly parallel with Milton's earlier outburst about the blind Fury." Tillyard goes further; he sees a close connection between the two egotistical outbursts:

One grievance is that 'the hungry Sheep look up and are not fed'; England has bad or useless teachers: the other is that he, Milton, whose ambition was to teach by writing a great epic, to feed the hungry sheep of England, may easily be cut off before it can be realized. It should be noted too that the second grievance, like

146 Tillyard, p. 83.
147 Tillyard, p. 83.
148 Tillyard, p. 84.
149 Tillyard, p. 85.
the first, is answered at the end of the second movement. Punishment is waiting; the two-handed engine stands ready to smite. But even less than at the end of the first section has mental calm been attained.

Therefore, we are left with the strong impression of a great egotist who has not yet achieved his "calm of mind, all passion spent".

Tillyard believes that lines 132 to 164 represent a transitional passage. "The sudden change from the terror of the two-handed engine to the incredible beauty of the description of the flowers contains an implication that somehow the 'Dorique delicacy', of which the description of the flowers is the highest example in Milton, is not irreconcilable with the sterner mood, and hence is able to insinuate some comfort." In addition, some comfort is derived from the dally with a false surmise, the escape into pure romance: "Where the great vision of the guarded Mount/ Looks toward Namanoos and Bayona's hold..." However, these comforts "are but minor leading up to the greater solution."

For Tillyard, the passage from line 165 to 193 represents the real subject of the poem:

But his fears of premature death, though part of the subject, are not the whole.

150 Tillyard, p. 84.
151 Tillyard, p. 84.
152 "Lycidas", ll. 161-2.
153 Tillyard, p. 84.
The real subject is the resolving of those fears (and of his bitter scorn of the clergy) into an exalted state of mental calm. The apotheosis of Lycidas in the penultimate paragraph has a deeper meaning: it symbolizes Milton's own balanced state of mind to which he won after the torments he had been through.

While this passage purports to describe the resurrection of Lycidas and his entry into heaven, "More truly it solves the whole poem by describing the resurrection into a new kind of life of Milton's hopes, should they be ruined by premature death or by the moral collapse of his country." Heavenly fame is the only permanent and worthwhile goal: "But above all the fourth section describes the renunciation of earthly fame, the abnegation of self by the great egotist, and the spiritual purgation of gaining one's life after losing it." Therefore, it is possible to see in "Lycidas" a unity of purpose which cannot be seen if the death of Edward King is taken as the real subject of the poem.

It is now time to attempt an evaluation of Tillyard's analysis. His major premise is, I feel, his most contentious point. He states that "Fundamentally 'Lycidas' concerns Milton himself: King is but the excuse for one of Milton's most personal poems." However, Tillyard is condemned, in part, by his own words: for he says "This cannot be proved: it can only be deduced from

154 Tillyard, p. 82.
155 Tillyard, p. 84.
156 Tillyard, p. 85.
the impression the poem leaves." As soon as he says this his entire analysis is open to argument. How reliable are one's impressions? Can we ever arrive at an agreement about the real subject of the poem, if it is only a matter of impressions? How, then, can Tillyard assert that "Most criticism of 'Lycidas' is off the mark?" Does he not allow other critics to have impressions too? In the end, if we pursue Tillyard's logic to its ultimate conclusion, do we not have an many interpretations of "Lycidas" as we have critics of the poem? Moreover, how reliable are "the general circumstances of the poet" for ascertaining the "real subject" of the poem? If Milton was planning an overseas trip when he heard of King's death by drowning, he would doubtless have thought of the possibility of his own death, but this does not mean that he became so preoccupied with drowning that he made it part of the "real subject" of the poem. Some mention of drowning is part of the elegiac formula, especially with reference to the myth of Orpheus; it does not require a "personal circumstance" to bring it into the poem. To say that Milton used the pastoral elegy to express his personal circumstances in reference to drowning is

157 Tillyard, p. 80.
to ignore the tradition to which the poem belongs. Furthermore, how personal are the two "obvious personal passages?" While these passages appear personal (or give the "impression" of being personal), they are not. They are time-honored conventions. The "Lament for Bion" by Moschus established the convention that the writer of the elegy is the poetic successor of the dead poet, and is, therefore, justified in allowing some discussion of his own poetic aspirations; Virgil's "Daphnis" and "Gallus" follow a similar pattern. The "Ecologue by Two Nuns" by Radbertus established the convention of an extended invective against death; and finally, Petrarch's "Argus" and "Galatea" and Boccaccio's "Olympia" introduced satire against the corruptions in the church. Therefore, we see that the pastoral elegy is a literary genre which has gradually accommodated a diversity of content. Passages which appear as "egotistical outbursts" are, in fact, deferences to an established form. The more one reads other pastoral elegies, the less "egotistical" "Lycidas" appears; one's impression of a poem is not a fixed quantity. Neither does the ending of "Lycidas" represent the "abnegation of self by the great egotist"; rather, it represents the assertion
of self by a great poet. Nor is there any indication that Milton has renounced his pursuit of earthly fame as Tillyard suggests. The morrow will find the young poet in "fresh Woods, and Pastures new."
Fallacies of the Type Six Approach to "Lycidas"

The sixth approach to "Lycidas" is the most complex of all the approaches we have examined so far. In many ways it is also the most comprehensive because it involves both subjective and external criteria. This approach asserts that "As the renaissance wore on during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, all western Europe was inwardly shaken by some tremor of malaise and distrust."  

In the literature, painting, sculpture, architecture, religion, politics, and science of this period some profound disturbance had provoked a crisis in the previously accepted standards of aesthetics and epistemology. The exact nature of this profound disturbance is, in part, suggested in Donne's "The First Anniversary":

And new Philosophy calls all in doubt,  
The Element of fire is quite put out;  
The Sun is lost, and th'earth, and no man's wit  
Can well direct him where to looke for it ....  
'Tis all in peeces, all cohaerence gone;  
All just supply, and all Relation ....  
The worlds proportion disfigured is;  
That those two legges whereon it doth rely,  
Reward and punishment, are bent awry.  
And, Oh, it can no more be questioned,  
That beauties best, proportion, is dead.  

To find a name for this disturbance it was necessary to adopt one from art history:

Until recently we have lacked any name to denote this period when the renaissance optimism is shaken.

when proportion breaks down and experiment takes the form of morbid ingenuity or scalding wit; art and thought curve away unpredictably along private tangents; approximation, equivocation, and accommodation are accepted as working principles; the sensibility of writers and painters seems overexercised; all directions are confused and obscure .... Apparently we have now found a name for this disturbance: mannerism, a term adopted from art history.

In literature, says Sypher, mannerism occupies the period intervening between the ordered, gracious, balanced Renaissance harmony of Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* and the grandiloquent, massive, assertive baroque harmony of Milton's *Paradise Lost*. According to Sypher this intervening period was a time of unrest, dislocation, angularity, subjective excitement, protest, exacerbation, uncertainty, unresolved tensions, experimentation, apphrenson, fragmentation, and introspection. The author whose work best exemplifies these characteristics is John Donne, but the early work of Milton, notably "Lycidas", is also included in this period. In a word, then, Spenser, Donne (and the early Milton), and the late Milton form a continuum of integration, disintegration, and reintegration which Sypher has designated, respectively, as renaissance style, mannerist style, and baroque style.

"Lycidas", says Sypher, contains abundant evidence
of Milton's estrangement from the ordered and harmonious world of the Renaissance. As a highly sensitive, self-conscious artist he was responding to the shifting forces of his time and giving artistic expression to a disturbance which extended to all fields of political, economic, and cultural life. During Milton's lifetime the Coppenican theory had become an accepted fact. "The medieval ptolemaic system was irreparably broken when Copernicus proved that the universe is not geocentric." Kepler had published his Rudolphine Tables. This new cosmology gave men a sense of dislocation, of being alone and unprotected in an infinity of space. Theologians and scientists were disputing rigorously the flaming comet which appeared in 1577 and the Nova of 1572 which blazed so brightly it could be seen during the day.

We of the twentieth century can scarcely apprehend the alarm with which seventeenth-century man viewed these disturbances in his 'fixed' universe; it was tantamount to our fears of an atomic war. Furthermore, the struggles of what was later to be termed the Thirty Years War were having a profoundly disturbing influence on people of every stratum of society. Overseas exploration was forcing men to reconsider the boundaries of the known world. The growth of capitalism was beginning to exert pressure on the established

161 Sypher, p. 134.
social hierarchy and was, in part, responsible for the spreading philosophy of materialism. Disturbing concepts of the state and man could be found in the literature of the seventeenth-century bookstalls. Machiavelli's *The Prince* instructed men in hard realistic terms, utterly devoid of ethics, how to attain power and how to keep it. Montaigne's *Apology for Raymond Sebond* disclaimed that man had a special place in the eyes of the Lord; man was presented as a puny creature who could not even control his own nature. In the face of this multitude of disturbances, is it any wonder that Milton found the balanced, ordered, harmonious formulae of the Renaissance world inadequate for his artistic expression?

Since Milton had become alienated from the harmonious philosophy of his predecessors, he could not accept their conventions and traditions without numerous reservations. What these reservations were will now be examined. First, we shall consider a number of statements by Wylie Sypher and Arnold Hauser; then we shall look at a refinement of these statements in the criticism of Roy Daniells.

Mannerism is always concerned with the relationship between tradition and innovation. But this relationship is never simple. Nor is the attempted resolution free of tension; in the mannerist poem the tension between
the form and the content is always apparent:

Tradition is here nothing but a bulwark against the all too violently approaching storms of the unfamiliar, an element which is felt to be a principle of life but also of destruction. It is impossible to understand mannerism if one does not grasp the fact that its imitation of classical models is an escape from the threatening chaos, and that the subjective overstraining of its forms is the expression of the fear that form might fail in the struggle with life and art fade into soulless beauty .... Only an age which had experienced the tension between form and content, between beauty and expression, as its own vital problem could do justice to mannerism and work out the true nature of its individuality in contrast to both the Renaissance and the baroque.

The unresolved tension of the mannerist poem is, in part, the subjective overstraining induced by the accommodation of new content within a traditional form. There are, as we shall see, a number of reasons why the new content resists, as it were, the process of accommodation.

Nothing characterizes the disturbance of the classical harmony better than the mannerist disintegration of that unity of space, that coherence of composition, that consistency of logic which, for the Renaissance, were among the most important conditions for artistic expression:

Mannerism begins by breaking up the Renaissance structure of space and the scene to be represented into separate, not merely externally separate but also inwardly differently organized parts. It allows different spatial values, different standards, different possibilities of movement to predominate in the different sections of the picture: in one

the principle of economy, and in another that of extravagance in the treatment of space. This breaking up of the spatial unity of the picture is expressed most strikingly in the fact that there is no relationship capable of logical formulation between the size and the thematic importance of the figures. Motifs which seem to be of only secondary significance for the real subject of the picture are often overbearingly prominent, whereas what is apparently the leading theme is devalued and suppressed.

The mannerist critic, then, sees "Lycidas" as fractured into separately organized parts. The spatial unity of the poem is distorted; there is a disjunction between the thematic importance of the figures and their prominence in the poem. There is no logical coherence between the motifs and the central subject: the subject of grief which in a traditional elegy would be the primary theme is handled with economy whereas the conceit of personal fears and ambition is handled with extravagance. The unity of the poem has been fractured because the traditional rules of proportion have not been observed.

Mannerism manifests itself in a tension between the spiritual and the physical trends of the age, between the new materialism and the new mysticism. The result is a curious combination:

The new spiritualism manifests itself rather in the tension between the spiritual and physical elements than in the complete overcoming of classical kalokagathia. The new formal ideals do not in any way imply a renunciation of the charms of

163 Arnold Hauser, pp. 102-3.
Is Milton tormented by his physical senses in "Lycidas"? Does the temptation "To sport with Amaryllis in the shade, / Or with the tangles of Neaera's hair" illustrate the importunate demands of his body? Is Milton's doctrine of chastity creating an agonizing pressure between his mind and body? Do the images seized upon by his imagination not assuage, or even represent, the vexation of his spirit? Is Sypher correct when he says that "If the inward unrest of mannerist poetry and faith could really be released in the concrete image, then the tensions would be reduced by the image?" In my opinion the answer to each of these questions is no. My reason for disagreeing is simply that there is no evidence in the poem to support these statements; and since Sypher provides no evidence, I shall pass on to his next point.

Mannerist art contains no final resolution. There is no total release; there is only lingering tension. The artist appears to be suffering from internal and unintelligible strain. His sensibility seems to be

---

164 Arnold Hauser, p. 106.
164 "Lycidas", ll. 68-9.
165 Sypher, p. 165.
overresponding to unknown stimuli and, therefore, the emotional implications appear incongruous with the logic of the composition. The result is often a tone of insolence, punctuated by egotistical outbursts:

... there is a psychological crisis behind the mannerist poses, which may look like cliches; but the cliches hardly conceal the malaise. The insolence and calculation in mannerism do not arise from self-confidence, but are really signs of anxiety and repression. 167

Where can we find insolence in "Lycidas"? The mannerist critic would answer that the insolent strain within Milton's mannerist sensibility is not apparent in "Lycidas" because it is reduced by his wit, his clever conceits, his juggling with opposites, his ambiguity, his revolving point of view -- in short, by his techniques of accommodation. The tone of this poem is never allowed to degenerate into insolence because the technical ingenuity traps and contains the inner tensions of the poet. This sounds like searching for a black cat in a dark cellar. Sypher has postulated the existence of something, then said it cannot be seen because of the existence of something else.

The mannerist poet involves us in the pressure of his own experience, often speaking to us by

167 Sypher, p. 114.
direct address; and thus, he shortens the aesthetic distance between us and his poem. We seem to have broken into a private conversation. We become suddenly aware of the personal tone of each verse:

The centre of psychological gravity has been displaced, and when the force of the poem or painting has been diverted toward us, we are compelled, willy-nilly, to make a double adjustment: first, to meet the shock of the diversion, and second, to regain some aesthetic distance and disengage ourselves from the situation in which we have been involved. The "logical" vanishing point in renaissance style did not require this special adjustment to the aesthetic representation. 168

Most readers and critics, I feel, do not have this experience when they read "Lycidas" for the first time. First, they do not experience the 'shock' of initial involvement. On the contrary, the usual complaint is a lack of involvement. Second, they do not experience an immediate response to recoil some distance from the poet's "centre of psychological gravity", "to regain some aesthetic distance" and disengage themselves from the situation in which they have become over-involved. The usual response to an initial reading of "Lycidas" is one of puzzlement, not to recoil from the poet's "centre of psychological gravity", but to ask where it is. Again, the usual response is not to regain some

168 Sypher, p. 145.
aesthetic distance, but to feel there is too much aesthetic distance. We feel no need to question the "extravagance of our initial involvement". Moreover, few readers would agree that, in reference to "Lycidas", "The mannerist composition has a psychological focus, perhaps, rather than any stated structural focus." Most readers feel that "Lycidas" is over-structured.

Mannerism, then, means experimentation, accommodation, tentative commitment, learned and personal reference, cleverness in handling and reshaping conventional forms and a shifting point of view. Its style is variable and diverse. Contrary to critics, such as T.S. Eliot, who assert that mannerism seems to make no attempt at organization, mannerist poetry has a logic of its own, a dramatic logic which does not operate by transition and sequence, but by circulating through extremes, opposites, and divergencies, digesting every sort of experience, answering the aesthetic needs of the poet, and striving to be dramatic in an immediate, intense utterance.

Before proceeding to Daniell's refinement of the mannerist approach to "Lycidas", let us try to evaluate Sypher's contribution. First, Sypher's...

169 Sypher, p.145.
an analysis tends to be abstract; he seems to be in a hurry to set down first principles; he offers a great many suggestions, but leaves the detailed analysis of specific works unfinished. As one critic has remarked, "In Wylie Sypher's book ... the effect is a cross-country gallop. Exhilarated and shaken, the reader thinks he will retrace part of the marvellous journey on foot." Second, Sypher's appeal to cosmological, social, and political disturbances as a justification for the distruct, dissonance, restlessness, and introspection of the mannerist temperament seems to me a little facile. All periods of history contain disturbances to those who live them. It is only in retrospect that we can say that certain periods of history were more 'harmonious' than others. Third, several of the basic tenets of mannerism do not apply to "Lycidas". There is no evidence in the poem to suggest that Milton was tormented by his physical senses, that the importunate demands of his body in conflict with the rigidity of his will were creating an agonizing pressure which found expression in the poem. Moreover, what evidence is there that Milton was "suffering from internal and unintelligible strain?" The strains which Milton suffered in "Lycidas" appear intelligible

to most readers; and they are not wholly internal—
death, corruption in the church, ambition, and grief are
prompted by external events. Furthermore, we do not
experience shock over the intensity of our initial involve-
ment and we do not recoil from the poet's "centre of
psychological gravity." These are serious discrepancies
between Sypher's mannerist scheme and the structure of
"Lycidas".

In his refinement of the mannerist approach to
"Lycidas" Daniells is more tentative than Sypher. He
says that "Literary Mannerism has not yet received
enough critical attention to permit any but tentative
conclusions." Moreover, he sets narrower limits on
the mannerist period. He says that "Mannerism flourished,
and was perhaps the leading style, between 1520 or 1530
and 1590 or 1600." He limits his attention to analogies
within the arts, whereas Sypher included analogies
among politics, religion, economics, cosmology, etc.
Daniells takes the commensurability of the arts and
literature as axiomatic: "Critical discussion now
brings together without a sense of strain the schematic
evaluation of European art and the categories of
literary form." Moreover, "it can be argued that
the arts of a given period form a total pattern, the
same impulses expressing themselves in a variety of

172 Daniells, p. 5.
173 Daniells, p. 6.
174 Daniells, p. 3.
Furthermore, "Sometimes the visual arts of a whole area or period can be shown to echo in imagery or iconography the philosophers and poets." The reason for the separateness of art and literature is, in part, an academic one: "The academic habit of keeping disciplines for pedagogical reasons in their own compartments has discouraged the formation of a flexible set of terms."

Daniells does not overlook the possibility of social causes for the apprehensiveness of the mannerist temperament: "Those who seek to define Mannerism ... have also suggested social causes which induced subjective states in the artist which could themselves become criteria." He is, however, more reluctant than Sypher to imply a direct causal relationship: "How far such external operations of policy and propaganda can be made responsible for, let us say, the emotional instability, apprehensiveness, and melancholy of Pontormo is open to question." In addition, Daniells points out a significant fact which Sypher completely overlooks:

It remains to add that most Mannerist work, from its very nature as part of religious ceremonial, was of a public kind. The artists may have been self-centred and vastly concerned with their own techniques and personal feelings. But because they worked for patrons, if for no other reason, they expressed an aristocratic, intensely cultured, and international sentiment.

175 Daniells, p. 3.
176 Daniells, p. 3.
177 Daniells, p. 4.
178 Daniells, p. 8.
179 Daniells, p. 8.
180 Daniells, p. 9.
The public aspect of the mannerist production escaped Sypher's attention. Would it not have induced a slight change in his analytical perspective?

Daniells agrees with many of Sypher's basic tenets, or first principles, of mannerism. He sees the same initial conflict between tradition and innovation: "The starting point for a study of Mannerism is the recognition that the Mannerist artist invariably employs traditional themes and materials and frequently gives the impression that he is about to employ them in a traditional way." He sees a similar rupture of the spatial unity of the work into separately organized parts: "The scene presents itself as an accretion of separate parts with different internal organization. The size of the figures may contrast sharply with their thematic importance; the leading the, in consequence, may be veered away from." Moreover, he implies a similar conflict between the mind and the body: "The bodies not infrequently turn and twist to give the figura serpentinata. Thus there arises a new beauty, no longer resting on real forms measurable by the model or on forms idealized on this basis, but rather on an inner artistic reworking on the basis of harmonic or rhythmical requirements." Furthermore, he

---

181 Daniells, p. 7.
182 Daniells, p. 8.
183 Daniells, p. 8.
infers a similar conflict between the formal demands of classical models and the subjective demands of the artist: "Mannerism amounts to a simultaneous imitation and distortion of classical models, to a replacement of the harmony and normality of classical art by more subjective and more suggestive features. At one time there is the vision of a new spiritual content in life, at another an exaggerated intellectualism." Finally, he agrees with Sypher that a mannerist work contains insoluble conflicts; the final resolution does not effect a total release from the tension of the preceding conflict.

A mannerist work, then, is one in which the artist modifies the conventional form in response to the urgency of internal and external pressures; its aim is to "awaken a new set of responses to the ultimate general enrichment of the art in question", and to "put the spectator on the alert, to rouse the expectation that some message of extreme and sombre urgency is about to be transmitted"; it is the product of employing familiar forms to different ends, "that the mind baffled by time and fate may nevertheless with inconceivable ingenuity and virtuosity express that bafflement to the everlasting enrichment of its own endurance and comprehension":

184 Daniells, p. 9.
185 Daniells, p. 10.
187 Daniells, p. 18.
Mannerism canvasses the elements of a fixed traditional pattern, unexpectedly combines them to achieve effects of dissonance, dislocation, and surprise, and illuminates the reader's mind, enabling him to reconsider the whole traditional pattern of their relationship. Mannerist works, even when they appear by classical standards to be unfinished, perverse, or inscrutable, do succeed in reflecting a real side of our psychological life. 188

Daniells' contribution to our understanding of "Lycidas" lies, not only in his clarification of the basic tenets, or first principles, of mannerism, but also in his application of these principles to the structure of the poem. But before examining this application of general principles to specific details, one final parallel between Sypher and Daniells should be noted. Both critics recognize the opposition with which any attempt to link Milton with mannerism will be greeted. General opinion holds that Milton is a baroque artist. Therefore, both Sypher and Daniells point out that an artist may adopt more than one style during his lifetime. As Daniells says, "it is now recognized that metaphysical and Baroque styles may appear successively in the same writer and need cause no more disturbance to the critic than the discovery that Bernini's early sculpture of Aeneas leaving Troy is Mannerist in its whole conception and design." 189 His explanation for this duality of styles in Milton is, as it were, a logical deduction

188 Daniells, p. 11.
189 Daniells, p. 19.
from the general theory of mannerism: "It is, after all, not unreasonable to expect from Milton one or two Mannerist pieces. He was a strict contemporary of the Metaphysicals and exposed to the same cultural influences and climate of opinion." 190

"Lycidas" is a mannerist poem, says Daniells, for several reasons. First, there is the ambiguity of the central figure. The poem is nominally about Edward King, but Milton focuses our attention on himself. "By the twentieth line Milton is engrossed with himself." It is normal, acknowledges Daniells, "to pass from the fate of one's friend to one's own fate" in the pastoral elegy. "But in "Lycidas" the move is made with what seems inexcusably indecent haste." Furthermore, though Milton shoves King aside, he does not "face the reader or take the centre of the stage." In addition, other figures enter the poem and temporarily occupy the centre of the stage. Therefore, at the end of the poem we are left in "substantial doubt" as to who is the central figure in the poem. Second, there is no overall organization of the total space within the poem. "There is no ordered landscape in which everything is made to achieve congruity .... Each figure tends to bring his own space with him and these neither

---

190 Daniells, p. 19.
191 Daniells, p. 38.
192 Daniells, p. 38.
193 Daniells, p. 38.
194 Daniells, p. 38.
195 Daniells, p. 39.
combine into a totality of perspective nor separate into planes having some relation. After the irruption of Milton's aspirations for poetic fame, we no sooner re-enter the pastoral world of Arethuse, Mincius, Neptune, Hippotades, Panope, and Camus, and there follows the "wrathful irruption by St. Peter whose own space, including the gates of Heaven and Hell, is violently superimposed upon the pastoral scene." The unity of the space in the poem has been fractured because the traditional rules of proportion have not been observed. Third, there is a rapid shifting of the literary allusions; there is not adequate preparation for their appearance: "the references in 'Lycidas' are hasty, angular, and individually coruscating." Hence, there is a refusal to satisfy the expectations which have been aroused. For example, the invocation of the "two-anded engine" is followed by the catalogue of flowers which in turn is followed by "the great vision of the guarded Mount." Fourth, the versification exhibits mannerist characteristics. "Milton, it appears, based the versification of 'Lycidas' upon the Italian canzone but with an eclecticism all his own." His eclecticism effected a liberation of the verse paragraph from its association with repeated piedi:

196 Daniells, p. 40.
197 Daniells, p. 40.
198 Daniells, p. 41.
199 Daniells, p. 41.
"the rhyming line serving as a link is not only employed without a division of the passage into piedi or versi but is also reinforced by the shortening of the linking line to three feet so that after this failure of expectation the next line springs forward, the argument itself being thus opened out." Fifth, there is a refusal to reach an adequate resolution. For example, the first forty-nine lines draw the reader into the closed pastoral world; then Mitlon enters with an outburst against death; then Phoebus enters with words of comfort. "Yet although there has been such an outburst, such excess of emotion within rigid boundaries, there is neither adequate resolution of forces nor adequate release of energy." Sixth, the content and technical features of the poem are direct counterparts of the author's intense, inner experience. "This experience included a sense of deep uncertainty and helplessness." These six characteristics, then, represent the "small number of intelligible vectors" which qualify "Lycidas" as a mannerist poem. But before proceeding to an evaluation of these six vectors, it should be noted that Daniells refutes one of Sypher's vectors, namely the mind-body vector. He correctly points out that "The erotic shapes of Amaryllis and Neaera ... are no more than

---

200 Daniells, p. 42.
201 Daniells, p. 44.
202 Daniells, p. 47.
203 Daniells, p. 49.
glimpsed. The thought of sensuous love is crowded out by the thought of death ... and where this extreme tension of thought would lead cannot be guessed, for Phoebus intervenes."

A few questions might be asked of one of Daniells' basic assumptions. Can we assume that Milton was "exposed to the same cultural influences and climate of opinion" as were the metaphysical poets? It strikes me that the quiet, scholarly isolation of Milton's Horton was a far cry from the urban bustle of Donne's London. I do not wish to imply that Milton was less aware of the social, economical, and political affairs of his day than Donne, but I do feel that some consideration should be given to the obvious differences in their daily routines. Moreover, if involvement in social and political events lends to the production of a mannerist temperament, then it is more probable that Milton would have written a mannerist poem at the end of his poetic career than at the beginning; instead Milton, after interminable social and political conflict, together with great suffering and personal loss, reached a "calm of mind, all passion spent."

At this point, I would like to suggest what may seem a paradoxical comment: perhaps Milton's mannerist

204 Daniells, p. 40.
technique did not proceed from a mannerist temperament; perhaps there is another explanation.

Let us now consider the "ambiguity of the central figure." Daniells says that by the twentieth line of the poem "Milton is engrossed with himself." The twentieth line is: "With lucky words favour my destin'd Urn." But does the "my" in this line refer to Milton personally. I submit that it refers to the dramatis persona, or mask, of "the uncouth Swain"; is it not traditional with the pastoral elegy that it is spoken from behind a mask, or persona, of a fellow poet who represents, not any one poet, but all poets? If this is true, then the transition from the fate of the dead poet to the fate of the living one is made with haste, but not "inexcusably indecent haste."

However, with regard to the entrance of the other figures I agree with Daniells' comment; Phoebus enters deus ex machina and St. Peter rides in, as it were, on the crest of a huge wave of emotion. We are definitely left in doubt as to who is the central figure in the poem. Furthermore, I agree with Daniells' comment that there is no over-all organization of the total space within the poem, that each of the figures occupies a separate space.
which neither combines into a single perspective nor separates into various levels of meaning. However, are both these characteristics the result of a mannerist temperament? Is it not possible that they are artifacts of Milton's artistic procedure? It seems likely that Milton was ambitious to produce the greatest pastoral elegy ever written; he was ambitious to cram the entire pastoral elegiac tradition into a single 193-line poem. In doing this, he was forced, unavoidably one might say, into the ambiguity of the central figure because he included too many figures into too short a space, and thereby distorted the balance of the poem; the organization of the spatial relations was likewise distorted. Is it not possible that this simple logic accounts for the apparent mannerist characteristics of the poem, or does it require an explanation involving a complex nexus of cultural influences and personal apprehension?

With regard to Milton's innovations in the versification of the canzone, I feel that the evidence given contradicts, rather than affirms, Milton's use of the techniques of mannerism. If the "rhyming line serving as a link is not only
employed without a division of the passage into piedi or versi but is also reinforced by the shortening of the linking line to three feet", then this serves to consolidate, not to fragment, the verse paragraph. If this is true, then Milton's innovation is a baroque tendency and not a mannerist one.

The lack of an adequate resolution in "Lycidas" cannot be denied. But again, could this not be an artifact of his artistic method? By crowding so much into 193 lines, Milton has not allowed himself enough room to work out a convincing resolution. There is too much density in the poem; human emotions will not admit the amount of condensation Milton asks.

It follows from the preceding comments that I do not agree with Daniells's sixth mannerist characteristic. I do not feel that the structure and technical features of the poem are direct counterparts of Milton's "sense of uncertainty and helplessness." Rather, they show the eagerness and ambition of a young poet who has attempted a virtuoso performance and who has succeeded in everything except the hierarchical arrangement of his characters and an adequate resolution of the tensions which were generated in the poem.
Fallacies of the Type Seven Approach to "Lycidas"

The seventh approach to "Lycidas" is, in effect, the diametrical opposite of the mannerist approach. Instead of disharmony among the structural aspects of the poem, this approach sees complete harmony; instead of a lack of an adequate resolution, this approach sees a complete resolution, a "calm finality". According to the adherents of this literary stratagem, "Lycidas" consists of three movements, parallel in pattern and almost equal in length, not unlike the construction of a concerto. Moreover, the three-movement structure does not exhaust the parallels between "Lycidas" and the concerto: each movement begins with a calm pastoral mood which makes possible three successive crescendoes; the third movement is an elaboration and summation of the two previous movements; finally, the three movements are rounded out by an introduction and coda. There is ample justification, then, for calling this the musical approach to "Lycidas".

Arthur Barker ardently endorses this "musical" approach to "Lycidas". He says that the poem represents perfect "symmetry of structure"; it

205 Arthur Barker, "The Pattern of Milton's 'Nativity Ode'," University of Toronto Quarterly, X (Toronto, 1940-1), p. 171.
is a poem in which "Milton's architectonic power is exerted with impressive results." He draws a precise parallel between the structure of "Lycidas" and the structure of a concerto: "Lycidas' consists of an introduction and conclusion, both pastoral in tone, and three movements, practically equal in length and precisely parallel in pattern." Moreover, each movement contains three parts: it begins with an invocation of the pastoral muses, poses a problem which is phrased in traditional elegiac terms, and presents a solution to the problem:

The first movement laments Lycidas the poet-shepherd; its problem, the possible frustration of disciplined poetic ambition by early death, is resolved by the assurance, "Of so much fame in heaven expect thy meed." The second laments Lycidas as priest-shepherd in a corrupt church, is resolved by St. Peter's reference to the "two-handed engine" of divine retribution. The third concludes with the apotheosis, a convention introduced by Virgil in Ecloga V but significantly handled by Milton. He sees the poet-priest-shepherd worshipping the Lamb with those saints "in solemn troops" who sing the "unexpressive nuptial song" of the fourteenth chapter of Revelation. The apotheosis thus not only provides the final reassurance but unites the themes of the preceding movements in the ultimate reward of the true poet-priest.

Three "successive and perfectly controlled crescendos" are made possible by the three-part structure and the three parallel contrasts of the pastoral opening and the personal ending. The cumulative effect is an
impressive poem which "performed a cathartic function for the poet himself" and was "the very process through which a balanced calm was brought out of emotional disquiet."

The appeal of Barker's analysis is its reduction of "Lycidas" into a symmetrical structure; anything symmetrical contains an aesthetic beauty which the mind finds hard to resist — even if the symmetry is forced upon the poem. It is possible to accept the tripartite structure of "Lycidas" which Barker offers, but do the three movements represent three "perfectly controlled crescendos"? I do not think so for two reasons. First, few people can accept the three proffered solutions as adequate resolutions. Does the assurance, "Of so much fame in heaven expect thy meed", pacify Milton's fear of premature death? I do not think so. Does the assurance of divine retribution assuage Milton's indignation toward the corrupted clergy? I think not. Do the saints "in solemn troops" singing the "unexpressive nuptial song" provide Milton with a "final reassurance"? Again, I do not think so. Therefore, if there are no adequate resolutions, there can be no crescendos. Second, within the movements which Barker describes there are no logical progressions from the calm pastoral mood to the anxiety of the personal problem. There are no gradual developments within the movements, only sudden intrusions. It is simply not accurate to

210 Barker, p. 171.
211 Barker, p. 171.
describe the transitions within the movements as "perfectly controlled crescendos." A crescendo implies a logical progression which rises to a certain point; this does not occur in "Lycidas".

A small note of reservation must be added. Barker's analysis is very brief and very abstract; it was not intended as a thorough analysis. It was given as a lengthy aside, as it were, while writing upon another poem. But there is no doubt that Barker must be congratulated for providing a fruitful set of suggestions which later critics will undoubtedly work out in greater detail.

A.S.P. Woodhouse sees a similar tripartite structure in "Lycidas". He says that what is characteristic of Milton's poetry is "the integral progression which carries the poet from one position or point of view at the beginning of the poem to another radically different at the end. The initial point of view is one that springs from Milton's extr-aesthetic experience, and is transformed in the aesthetic experience which is the poem." This "integral progression" which results in a radical change in Milton's point of view contains three distinct steps:

The starting point is something in Milton's extr-aesthetic experience, problematic and productive of emotional tension. The first necessity is to objectify this situation by

giving it poetic utterance. The second step is to review it in the light of the poet's profounder convictions, which likewise receive poetic utterance; and the result is the transcending of the problem. But both steps are taken under the impetus and direction of an aesthetic pattern; and it is not enough to say that the problem is transcended: the emotional tension is also resolved. Poetry, said Milton, has power 'to allay the perturbations of the mind and set the affections in right tune'.

In "Lycidas" the extr-aesthetic problem is the fear of a premature death which would cut short Milton's ambitions. The "integral progression" and radical change in point of view are the transition from mourning to consolation which is effected by the introduction of the Christian concept of immortality. "This appears directly in reference to the fate of Edward King, but in its wider application immortality become the example and symbol of a principle of healing and renewal, the effect of God's encompassing providence and power."

Woodhouse's analysis, like Barker's, has the aesthetic appeal of symmetry. Both see the poem as divided into three movements. On one issue, however, Woodhouse disagrees with Barker. He does not see the three movements as "perfectly controlled crescendos". Rather, he says that the first two movements "end with such realities as burst through the thin veil of allegory and shatter the pastoral tone; and with the pastoral tone collapse the frail and false supports and con-

213 Woodhouse, p. 8.
214 Woodhouse, p. 9.
solutions of the pagan world." In the third movement the pastoral tone is "not so much shattered as transcended by the higher realities of a faith, adumbrated at the conclusion of the two earlier movements, and now triumphantly proclaimed." This faith is, of course, a reaffirmation of the belief in the resurrection and immortality of the drowned poet and the similar fate which awaits Milton. This is, I feel, a more accurate description of what actually occurs in the poem than that which Barker offers. But does the third movement present an adequate resolution? Woodhouse avoids the problems raised by the mannerist critics, namely, the "ambiguity of the central figure" and the lack of an over-all organization of the spatial relations in the poem. If King is as important as Woodhouse assures us he is, why does he not receive more space in the poem? If the resurrection and immortality of King are the "final reassurance", why does it receive so short a treatment, and why does Milton not prepare the reader for the acceptance of this conclusion? Again, it must be pointed out that Woodhouse's comments are very brief, compressed, and abstract. He has not worked out his analysis in as much detail as is necessary for a clear articulation of his thesis.

---

215 Woodhouse, p. 10.
216 Woodhouse, p. 10.
Fallacies of the Type Eight Approach to "Lycidas"

The eighth, and final, approach to "Lycidas" is an unusual one. So far, only one critic has asserted this position. There are, however, two reasons for giving some consideration to this position. First, it is a potential approach to "Lycidas"; by this, I mean that it may become fashionable in the future. Second, and more importantly, it is the approach of Dr. Johnson. "But when Johnson held an opinion which seems to us wrong, we are never safe in dismissing it without inquiring why he was wrong; he had his own 'errors and prejudices', certainly, but for lack of examining them sympathetically we are always in danger of merely countering error with error and prejudice with prejudice."

Dr. Johnson's remarks about the diction, rhymes, versification, and passion of "Lycidas" are so familiar that I need not repeat them. But for the purpose of the present discussion, I feel it is germane to quote two of his statements. First, he stated that "In this poem there is no nature, for there is no truth; there is not art, for there is nothing new. Its form is that of a pastoral; easy, vulgar, and therefore disgusting;

217 Eliot, p. 312.
whatever images it can supply are long ago exhausted; and its inherent improbability always forces dissatisfaction on the mind." Second, he stated that "With these trifling fictions are mingled the most awful and sacred truths, such as ought never to be polluted with such irreverend combinations." Both these statements are indicative of Dr. Johnson's poetic sensibility — which was obviously not Milton's poetic sensibility. T.S. Eliot put his finger on the problem when he said that Johnson's criticism of "Lycidas" "represents the judgment of a man who had by no means a deaf ear, but simply a specialized ear."

Moreover, there are political overtones in Johnson's criticism. "Reading Johnson's essays one is always aware that Johnson was obstinately and passionately of another party." Other critics, such as F.T. Prince, have written less sympathetically of Johnson's sensibility:

Dr. Johnson's severity towards the pastoral convention of the poem has had little effect upon its reputation and its appeal, and has been sufficiently answered by criticism from the early nineteenth century to our own time. His denial of beauty to the verse may be felt to be equally a revelation of the sharp limit of his sensibility....

Other critics, such as G.S. Fraser, have attempted to find an 'excuse' for Johnson's sensibility:

219 Johnson, p. 58.
220 Eliot, p. 325.
221 Eliot, p. 313.
222 Prince, p. 71.
... one could excuse Dr. Johnson for not liking "Lycidas", for hating the fusion of pagan and Christian ideas, because he was writing in another age, when Christian belief could no longer expand, like a great conqueror, over the whole universe of pagan symbols, but had to contract, like a declining Empire, and sullenly protect itself. 223

One could, of course, answer Dr. Johnson's comments point for point, but to do this would be to back into the problem from the wrong perspective. We must begin, I feel, with the recognition that the poetic sensibility of different poets may be, not only different, but also contradictory; the poetic richness that we admire in Milton is not the same kind that we admire in, say, Webster or Donne. To say that Dr. Johnson's remarks are wrong is to miss the point; it is more correct to say that he is criticizing the poem for not being something other than it was intended to be. He has committed the fallacy of the mistaken intention.

223 Fraser, p. 42.
Conclusion

In the preceding eight chapters we have examined eight broad approaches to "Lycidas". Of the eight approaches, I believe that the first six represent valid avenues of explanation. The seventh, or musical approach, has not been worked out in detail by any critic, but there is some suggestion that it will not prove an effective approach to the poem: since the musical approach is diametrically opposed to the mannerist approach which has been worked out with considerably thoroughness and which has proved a highly effective mode of criticism, it appears unlikely that the musical approach will achieve any importance. However, this does not preclude the possibility that some critic in the future might pursue this approach and obtain new and valuable insights into the poem. The eighth approach, or Johnson's approach, is not an effective approach to the poem. Johnson's criticism of "Lycidas" is something of an non sequitur; it represents a poetic sensibility distinctly different from Milton's sensibility; their artistic standards must remain separate because they are incommensurable. On the other hand, the first six approaches to "Lycidas" have much to recommend themselves; for each represents a lens through which numerous features of the poem are magnified into clarity; each adds to the total meaning and value of the poem. The first six approaches represent a critical performance worthy of lasting praise; for they
have immensely enhanced our knowledge of the poem; they have clearly articulated the critical problems which now hold our attention; they have indicated avenues for future research; finally, they have augmented our appreciation of the poem to a lasting applause, and for some, to such enthusiasm as to declare "Lycidas" the greatest short poem in the English language. Without the critics who proposed these six approaches, any analysis of "Lycidas" would be rudimentary and fragmentary; for it is a necessary precondition for any contemporary critic of "Lycidas" that he must first climb to the shoulders of these critics.

Taken together the first six approaches convince us that "Lycidas" is indeed a complex poem of many dimensions. However, all six approaches have failed on five signal points. First, none of the approaches can account for the tremendous aesthetic impact which "Lycidas" leaves upon the reader who is sufficiently familiar with the tradition of the pastoral elegy to read it with ease and with pleasure; yet each approach claims to have discovered the structural principle which controlled the choice and arrangement of the parts and which established the meaning, value, and unity of the whole. A sufficient explanation of the unique and powerful impact which the consensus of critical opinion attributes to the poem must be endemic in any critical approach.
which claims to establish the meaning, value, and unity of the poem. Second, none of the approaches account for the fusion, or what T.S. Eliot has called the "new compound", of tradition and the individual talent; none of the approaches give sufficient attention to the two preconditions which Matthew Arnold said were necessary for the creation of a great work of literature: the "power of the man" and the "accumulated forces of tradition." None have insisted that the intelligent use of tradition helps both to inform the artist of what is valuable and to assist him in the active process of acquiring it. Third, none of the approaches have sufficiently emphasized that the continuity of the pastoral elegy as a literary genre has played a major role in the construction of the poem. F.T. Prince is the only critic to view "Lycidas" as the culmination of over two thousand years of literary inheritance, but his remarks are limited to the technical features of versification; no critic has insisted that the content of "Lycidas" might also be the culmination of over two thousand years of literary inheritance. Fourth, none of the approaches mention the pastoral unity of the poem; for a poem which contains not less than forty-one pastoral conventions this fact is indeed strange.
Nevertheless, the pastoral unity of the poem remains a lacuna in each of the six approaches. Fifth, none of the approaches have sufficiently emphasized the multidimensional feature of the poem; it is necessary to show that "Lycidas" possesses a larger, more organic, more synthetic unity than any of the critics have so far suggested. Five issues, then, are left unanswered by the six approaches to "Lycidas"; these are: the tremendous aesthetic impact of the poem, the fusion of tradition and the individual talent, the continuity of the pastoral elegy as a literary genre, the multidimensional feature of the poem, the pastoral unity of the poem. Each of these five issues must be subsumed under a larger unity before the meaning and value of the poem can be established.

Most critics agree that when Milton set out to write "Lycidas", his ambition was to write the best possible pastoral elegy. The numerous statements about the density of the texture of the poem further suggest that Milton's ambition was to include as much as possible in as short a space as possible. It is possible to read the poem, as E.M.W. Tillyard has done, and see an extensive biographical statement of Milton's fears and aspirations, friendships and hatreds; also, it is possible to read the poem, as James Hanford has done, and see a literal statement
of Edward King's death; moreover, it is possible to read the poem, as Richard Adams has done, and see analogies between King's death and resurrection, and the archetypal pattern of death and rebirth of classical mythology; furthermore, it is possible to read the poem, as John Crowe Ransom and T.S. Eliot have done, and see a complex and self-conscious technical and compositional unity; finally, it is possible to read the poem, as Wylie Sypher and Roy Daniells have done, and see a great many mannerist features. The problematic feature of these various readings is that each claims that what the poem is about is different from what the others say it is about; each claims to have discovered the major focus, or central interest, of the poem. According to E.M.W. Tillyard the poem is mainly about Milton himself; according to Cleanth Brooks and John Hardy "Lycidas" is mainly a symbolist poem whose theme is the place and meaning of poetry in an inimical world; according to T.S. Eliot and John Crowe Ransom the poem is mainly an object of ambitious technical apprenticeship; according to Wylie Sypher and Roy Daniells "Lycidas" is mainly about the artistic recreation of a complex nexus of cultural and personal dissonance. The fact is that "Lycidas" is about all these things. But it is not about these things in the central way in which each of the approaches claim. The structural principle
which is operating to amalgamate these various elements has not yet been articulated.

The structural principle operating in "Lycidas" is analogous to the structural principle of a Renaissance cathedral: each of the parts buttresses all of the other parts, yet no one part is allowed to gain dominance over the others. The central unity is the fluid dynamism of the interrelationship of the parts. The mastery of the thing is the orchestration of the parts: this alone accounts for the tremendous aesthetic impact of "Lycidas". For example, the water imagery buttresses the archetypal myth of the drowning of Orpheus which buttresses the literal statement of Edward King's death by drowning which buttresses the biographical statement of Milton's fear of death, possibly by drowning, which buttresses the apprehension and uncertainty of the mannerist outlook which buttresses the self-conscious struggle for technical mastery. But to say that "Lycidas" is mainly about an archetypal pattern or mainly about Milton's fears of death is to miss the structural principle upon which the poem was constructed. Moreover, to pull out one structural component and say this is the central focus of the poem is to collapse the magnificence of the poem. No single component can account for the aesthetic impact or unity of "Lycidas".
The operation of this buttressing principle is extensive throughout the poem. A few more examples are perhaps the best way to prove the point: the images of laurel, myrtle, and ivy buttress the theme of immortality which buttresses the literal statement of Christian doctrine that assures King an eternity in heaven which buttresses the immortality of the Orpheus singer-poet-priest figure in the successive generations of poets which buttresses the mannerist handling of a traditional theme in a new fashion which in this case is the fracturing of the rules of proportion between the handling of death and immortality; or again, the stellar images buttress the theme of resurrection which buttresses the literal statement of King's soul having risen to heaven which buttresses the archetypal pattern of death and rebirth in the myth of Orpheus which buttresses the mannerist concern with release from inner and outer tensions, even though the final resolution may leave a residue of unresolved tensions. We see, therefore, that the organic unity of "Lycidas" is larger than any suggested by the critics of the first six approaches.

As was mentioned earlier the critics of "Lycidas" have not sufficiently emphasized the continuity of the pastoral elegy as a literary genre and, moreover, they have completely ignored the pastoral unity of the poem.
Therefore, I would like to offer sufficient evidence to prove that Milton wrote "Lycidas" in a continuing tradition and to show the extent of Milton's indebtedness to a host of famous predecessors. Furthermore, I would like to show the large number of pastoral conventions endemic to the poem -- sufficiently large, in fact, that "Lycidas" contains more pastoral conventions than any other pastoral elegy, and sufficiently large that "Lycidas" contains a pastoral unity all its own. Let us look, then, at the evidence. From Theocritus' "Daphnis" we find the following conventions: 1) an invocation to the Muse, 2) the universal lament of nature, 3) a procession of mourners, 4) a prayer that nature reverse her course, 5) the poet and the one he mourns are represented as shepherds in the fields, 6) the shepherd as singer, 7) a rustic setting, 8) mention of place names where the shepherd met his death, 9) an address to the nymphs, 10) an expression of idealized grief, 11) a consolation. From Theocritus' "Harvest Festival" we find the following convention: 12) the poet represents himself in the poem. From Moschus' "Lament for Bion" we find the following conventions: 13) the substitution of a personal friend for a legendary figure, 14) the writer of the elegy is the poetic successor of the dead shepherd and is (15), therefore, justified in
allowing himself digressions on his own poetic aspirations, 16) a flower passage, 17) an exaggeration of the pathetic fallacy. From Bion's "Lament for Adonis" we find the following convention: 18) the idyllic simplicity of. Theocritus's pastoral world gives way to artificiality and luxuriance. From Virgil's "Daphnis" we find the following conventions: 19) a note of joy attending the deification of the dead poet, 20) an elevation of tone, increase in dignity, an epic note, 21) the introduction of panegyric passages, 22) an allegorical element, 23) a graceful disguise for personal allusions, 24) an element of contemplation, 25) passages of didacticism. From Virgil's "Gallus" we find the following convention: 26) at the close the poem a reference to the end of the day and the departure of the shepherd. From Radbertus' "Ecologue by Two Nuns" we find the following conventions: 27) extended praise for the dead poet, 28) abundant references to the dead poet's life and work, 29) an invective against death, 30) a description of the joys of Paradise, 31) allusions to the immortality of the deceased poet and an increased note of joy and rapture, 32) a merger of the pagan and Christian traditions. From Petrarch's "Argus" and "Galatea" we find the following conventions; 33) satire against corruptions in the church, 34) a classic purity of language. From
Castiglione's "Alcon" we find the following conventions: 35) strong personal feeling, 36) an emphasis on the friendship between the dead shepherd and the singer of the lament, 37) the singer regrets that he was absent when the poet died, 38) a combination of scholarship and personal sentiment. From Alamanni's "Cosmos" we find the following conventions: 39) the importance of the principle of imitation of past elegiac writers, 40) exactness of method and craftsmanship. From Spenser's "November" we find the following convention: 41) grace, charm, freshness, gentleness which relieves the sad theme and makes grief more tolerably by surrounding it with images of beauty. And this is by no means a complete list. But it is sufficient to prove two points: first, the continuity of the pastoral elegy as a literary genre was of considerable interest to Milton; and second, "Lycidas" contains, among its many other minor unities, a pastoral unity.

The fusion of tradition and the individual talent is plainly visible in "Lycidas": the poet has encompassed the entire pastoral elegiac tradition in a single poem. What Spenser did in twelve long poems, Milton has done in one 193-line poem. This does not mean, however, that the poem is a collection of magnificent fragments. On the contrary, the literary conventions are cleverly adopted and skilfully woven into tightly organized
verse paragraphs; the economy of each verse, each paragraph is astonishing; the beauty of each line evokes lasting praise; each phrase and line is sonorous; the whole poem rings with verbal magic. In the end there is perhaps no finer statement about "Lycidas" than that made by Rosemond Tuve: "'Lycidas' is the most poignant and controlled statement in English of the acceptance of that in the human condition which seems to man unacceptable."
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Adams, H. "The Development of the Flower Passage in 'Lycidas'," Modern Language Notes, LXV (1950), 468-472.


Barker, A. "The Pattern of Milton's 'Nativity Ode'," University of Toronto Quarterly, X (1941), 171-2.


Chew, S. "'Lycidas' and the Play of Barnavelt," Modern Language Notes, XXXVIII (1923), 122.
Crane, R. "Gray's Elegy and 'Lycidas'," Modern Language Notes, XXXVIII (1923), 183-4.


Harrison, T. "A Note on 'Lycidas'," Studies in English, XV (1935), 22.


Hunter, W. "A Note on 'Lycidas'," Modern Language Notes, LXV (1950), 544.


Kane, R. "'Blind mouths' in 'Lycidas'," Modern Language Notes, LXVIII (1953), 239-40.

Kendall, L. "'Melt with Ruth'," Notes and Queries, CXCIII (1953), 145.


Nicolson, M. “Milton’s ‘Old Damoetas’,” Modern Language Notes, XLI (1926), 293-200.


Rinehart, K. "A Note on the First Fourteen Lines of Milton's 'Lycidas'," Notes and Queries, CXCVIII (1953), 103.


Strathmann, E. "'Lycidas' and the Translation of 'May'," Modern Language Notes, LII (1937), 398-400.


Thompson, W. "The Source of the Flower Passage in 'Lycidas','" Notes and Queries, CXVII (1952), 142-50.


Wann, L. "Milton's 'Lycidas' and the Play of 'Barnavelt'," Modern Language Notes, VIII (1922), 470-73.