

# THE VISIONS OF ORPHEUS IN MILTON'S LYCIDAS

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## RESUMO

As alusões ao mito de Orfeu em "Lycidas" de John Milton serão analisadas pela perspectiva de um signo relacional. Uma vez que o poema apresenta olhares opostos e diferentes incorporados no seu texto, a reescrita renascentista do mito de Orfeu será associada às mudanças de olhares, será acessada como a estrutura modeladora subjacente às transições entre um ponto de vista inocente e um ponto de vista iluminado e será pensada como uma tomada (fragmentada) de consciência no processo de definição de duas ordens de existência: a humana e a divina.

## PALAVRAS-CHAVE

olhar, ponto de vista, Orfeu, Milton.

The text, contexts, and pretexts of "Lycidas" have been variously assessed in a plethora of criticism. The present essay, however, takes reading as a form of interpretative communion and as the result of an interpretive vision. Thus, in relation to an informed reading of the superseding order of the "paradise" proposed by the poem,

we may do it separately, but not alone. Our delightful task stirs up what Milton called a gust for Paradise, not only by making us desire the life of active goodness his poem figures forth with such beauty and interest, but also by creating a community of readers for whom its radiant cosmos is a deeply shared experience. Students of Milton can always say with pleasure, 'This enterprise, many partake with me.' (McColley 1983:i)

Although McColley refers primarily to the experience of reading *Paradise Lost*, "Lycidas" has been proposed not only as the epic in seed, but also as a poem that charms the reader into a community of poet-shepherds for whom a radiant cosmos is their newly attained vision. The enterprise of reading this poem will focus on the optic relations entertained by the poem and materialized by the death-and-rebirth cycle sustained by the Orpheus myth. This optic or scopic

approach (and here I refer primarily to a magnifying lens used for a close reading) may help ground the text in its inner dialogics, guide the choice of relational signs within the text, and suggest an all-important relational sign – Orpheus’ silence/blindness or the vanishing point of literature – that will foreground the text’s “heavy changes” or ingrained order. These objectives will be informed, along the lines set out by Jean Starobinski and Martin Jay (1994:19-20), by a thoughtful adjustment of the eyes whose look “knows how to demand, in their turn, distance and intimacy, knowing in advance that the truth lies not in one or the other attempt, but in the movement that passes indefatigably from one to the other.” Such critical eyes must content themselves with the vertigo of distance and with the verve of intimacy; “one must desire that double excess where the look is always near to losing all its power.”

The cosmos of paradise has been left behind (or is yet to come), and the present world partakes of two orders: the human and the divine. The inner processes of “Lycidas” withstand the two orders and propose a new perspective for our immediate existence through the recreative powers of Orpheus. And it is exactly with the two orders of existence, the two elegiac strains, and the several speakers of the poem that Milton criticism has been occupied ever since the beginning of the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> Critics of all persuasions have more or less clearly suggested that the Orpheus myth may be the third term that participates in the dualities of the poem as the enactor of a twofold vision and as the encoder of a kind of redemptive message. This redemptive message, with its attendant changes and ingrained orders, will be assessed by way of a relational sign.<sup>2</sup>

Many critics have seen in the opening lines of “Lycidas” – “Yet once more” (1)<sup>3</sup> – the oblique voice of the poet Milton.<sup>4</sup> In reading “Lycidas,” one

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<sup>1</sup> See the following volumes for “Lycidas” criticism, its many voices, and the Orpheus myth: Blackburn (1992); Guillory (1983); Hooker (1992); Lawry (1962); Lieb (1994); Mallette (1981); Patrides (1982); Ransom (1962); Tillyard (1962, 1966).

<sup>2</sup> My take on “relational sign” in this essay relates to the process of adding a sign (with its signifier and signified) on to an ongoing chain of signification. This process may take place both forward and backward indefinitely.

<sup>3</sup> Further references are to this edition and line numbers will be included parenthetically in the text.

<sup>4</sup> Isabel MacCaffrey (1965:69), for instance, thinks “yet once more” is a feigned literalness that fails to evoke a complete pastoral world, and that the mode of presentation of the opening is unmediated. Louis Martz (1986:64-65) suggests that “yet once more” echoes Hebrews and that it is Milton’s promise of redemption in “Lycidas” that created things will be shaken for unshakeable things only to remain. John Shawcross (1993:68) sees “Milton typically protesting his unpreparedness in lines 1-7 and 186; in fact, he tries to resist writing by ‘denial vain, and coy excuse.’ But he is compelled ‘yet once more’ to poetry (not just elegiac verse).” Milton’s use of the formula “yet once more” in “Lycidas” may also be said to stand for the poet’s difficult choice to vent his poetic vocation without formal restraint. For Milton’s voice in the prophetic tag “yet once more,” see also Wittreich (1975:117-119) and Lieb (1978:23-28).



is not only confronted with a myriad of possible themes, but also surprised at the appearance of a profusion of quoted speeches from different persons. But "a poem is made of *speech*, the term 'speech' entails a particular speaker. In *Lycidas* the speaker is an unnamed rustic singer whose speech refers to a state of affairs, describes the appearance and quotes the statements of other speakers" (Abrams 1961:222). The state of affairs of the poem, its dynamic referent, is Edward King's death; the poem has its immediate referent in Lycidas's death, and the pattern of death-and-rebirth is the relational sign most keenly associated with Orpheus, Lycidas, and King. The farthest reaching theme of "Lycidas," and one that encompasses all others, is the pattern of death-and-rebirth; the many voices/gazes of "Lycidas" can be summed up in its relational sign: the Orphic pattern of death-and-rebirth.

Granted this initial sign is arrived at consciously and by cognitive means, and as such, it is the temporary product of a sustained process of mediative, inferential, and ever more nuanced reasoning. Since the movement from macrosigns (or at least ampler signs) to microsigns (or signs smaller in scope) involves subtle differences, the dynamic and immediate referents of this developed sign have been slightly altered as well. The dynamic referent of this sign is Edward King's premature death, followed by its immediate referent: Lycidas's untimely death. Untimely deaths and effortful rebirths are closely connected with the myth of Orpheus in general, and with the direct and indirect allusions to this myth in the text of "Lycidas" in particular. In relation to Orpheus, Richard Adams (1949:188) points out "the facts that he was a singer, 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" in his early writings and in "Lycidas" as well. "Lycidas" is a commemoration; the poem's pastoral speaker sings for the lately deceased, "the most complex participation of the swain is in an Orphic role" (Fowler 1970:174), and thus, the myth of Orpheus will be closely considered alongside the pattern of death-and-rebirth in "Lycidas."

The pattern of death-and-rebirth and the myth of Orpheus in "Lycidas" can be worked out in a dialogical heuristic, a multi-functional scopic device that will enable the face-to-face placement of the pattern of death-and-rebirth in "Lycidas" and the premature death of Lycidas on the one hand, and the pattern of death-and-rebirth in "Lycidas" and the myth of Orpheus on the other. The other elements of this dialogic and scopic reading, that is, the differentiation of voices and gazes (including the readers') in the text of "Lycidas" can be accounted for in a kind of Orphic dismemberment: in "Lycidas," the dialogical monody is performed by the dramatically represented

swain (the uncouth swain) who is the speaker of the poem, and Milton's lyric ego (or persona) who is a farther-reaching and more present voice. In almost all pastoral elegies, the singer of the lament is identified as a shepherd, but Milton's lyric persona's voice serves as a frame for the swain's song, which appears to introduce the poem. "Yet once more" is surely Milton's but it is not a person-speaker's voice; it is perhaps only a voice. This is the voice/gaze that at the end of the poem intrudes as "Thus sang the uncouth Swain to th'Oaks and rills", and prophesies or gazes into a future that opens up as "Tomorrow to fresh Woods, and Pastures new" (186,193).

Yet it is precisely the swain's and the framing song of Milton's lyric persona that make the reader of "Lycidas" encounter and recognize the familiar topoi of the pastoral elegy. "It is a remarkable moment, and it seems to confirm the usual view that the conventional and the individual are antithetical in *Lycidas*" (Alpers 1982:472). The antithesis in the poem lies in the framing song of Milton's lyric persona. The poem is pastoral and conventional insofar as its speaker belongs to a community of shepherd-singers, the speaker is to mourn a dead shepherd in song, and convey that nature is devastated by such loss. Moreover, the swain's song is conventional to the extent it observes the decorum and propriety of the pastoral, whereas "yet once more" opens the poem rather obliquely and abruptly. These opening words have been associated with Hebrews 12: 26-27 as well as with a conflation of Virgil's eclogues (2 and 7). In Hebrews, with its apocalyptic inferences as well, the words echo God's separation of transitory, historical things from eternity (Martz 1986:64-65). Whatever the idea of separation these words may denote, they report the reader to the point one "is to observe that the voice we hear in the *ottava rima* coda, the voice that guides us to look back at the swain and to consider what he has said and learned during the recitation of *Lycidas*, is in control of the poem's diction from the beginning" (Friedman 1971:8). That is, the swain sang thus: he separated the two orders of existence (the human and the divine), and this separation was prefigured, gazed at, from the very beginning. Lycidas's untimely death is inscribed in the order of transitory things, and at the same time, it partakes of the superseding order of eternity. "Yet once more" introduces the song performed by the swain, and ends the celebration or performance with the coda. "This mannerist readjustment of perspective forces us to reassess the speaker's role" (Baker 1971:35) and his own voice. The voice of Milton's lyric persona in the coda announces a reassessed consolation; this *consolatio*, or *commiato* (farewell), recapitulates the pastoral themes, describes the swain's process of grief and reaffirmation, and confides to us that Lycidas has not only been reborn in nature, Lycidas has been saved, that is, gazed on differently. The separation of the third-person epic speaker,



and the first-person pastoral speaker, that is, “the separation of the poet and his voice suggests that the violence of death has forced him to find new means and sources of authentic utterance” (Alpers 1982:472). If Virgil’s eclogues may have opened up the way of the interplay between monody and dialogue to Milton, the swain’s song, framed by another internal voice, emerges from the powerful topos of “yet once more.” The identifications and engagements of both speakers (the third-person epic speaker and the first-person pastoral speaker) prompt the Orphic sign of death-and-rebirth in “Lycidas.”

In “Lycidas,” the sign death-and-rebirth stands for both Lycidas’s symbolic death in the poem, and King’s actual death. King’s death is to the reader a collateral knowledge that makes up the common universe of discourse and that Milton’s informed readership shares with the author. On the other hand, the Orphic pattern of death-and-rebirth is analogous to the death depicted and bewailed in “Lycidas” to the extent that Lycidas after his death is either “in the blest Kingdoms meek of joy and love” where “There entertain him all the Saints above” (177,178) or “Henceforth thou art the Genius of the shore” (183), the protective deity of the becalmed Irish seas. The symbolic characteristic of this sign rests on the arbitrary and conventional (i.e., mythical, Orphic) relation of the pattern of death-and-rebirth, including Lycidas’s death and rebirth. This sign-function is context bound – Elizabethan “metaphysical” poetry together with the conventions of the pastoral are in question – and is associated with the aesthetic function of the symbolic sign.

The associations accomplished by the reader between both deaths (Lycidas’s and Orpheus’) in the poem and a possible pattern of death-and-rebirth, make up the basis upon which understanding of “Lycidas” is to be grounded. Thus, the myth of Orpheus can very well be an in-sight that propped up from Milton’s scholarly education to show that all dignity of purpose is lost and that perhaps the dramatic rhetorical question – what do study, clear vision and self-discipline avail if one should die ere one’s prime? – has not a practical answer. Milton may have asked himself such a question and weighed such loss until finally the myth of Orpheus appeared in his mind under these conditions. The Orpheus myth is then a power, a means to apprehend that his companion Edward King, like Orpheus, even though “he knew himself to sing” (10-11), could do nothing once confronted with death.

A second rhetorical question is proposed: to what extent can art outfight death? Or, in other words, to what extent can literature outfight blindness and near-sightedness? If Orpheus won Eurydice back from Pluto through his singing and playing the lyre, if he could not save himself from the fury of Thracian women, and not even Calliope would prevent him from being dismembered, then death would befall also:

Ay me, I fondly dream!  
Had ye been there for what could that have done?  
What could the Muse herself that *Orpheus* bore,  
The Muse herself, for her enchanting son  
Whom Universal nature did lament,  
When by the rout that made the hideous roar,  
His gory visage down the stream was sent,  
Down the swift *Hebrus* to the *Lesbian* shore? (56-63)

Orpheus' first loss is implicit; he has already lost his wife and descended to the underworld. His second loss is also implicit; he has looked back and Eurydice was to become only a temporary gain. His dismemberment is a consequence of this second loss; incomplete, Orpheus is to disdain earthly pleasure, and death is the outcome of such a tragedy.<sup>5</sup> Orpheus' second loss stems from the all-powerful fate and death: Eurydice was once half-regained, Pluto granted an illusion, and even the muse herself could not revert the cycles of nature. Orpheus is to die so that he can be reborn. Naturally, the idea of a final or ultimate relational sign is nothing but theoretical and categorical reasoning. In "Lycidas," at least the idea of a finalizing relational sign points toward the process of death becoming a generative transformation: art does not outfight death; literature does not outfight near-sightedness and blindness; art and literature may only view death and blindness differently, recreate them.

How the reader is to understand the generative transformation of death into life again concerns the way information is carried out; and such information is carried out in "Lycidas" dialogically. In order to point out both voices and gazes in "Lycidas," it is necessary beforehand to understand one or two points regarding the pastoral ethos. Theocritus, in his seventh Idyll, first introduced the name Lycidas into pastoral poetry. In the pastoral convention, the literary agon or singing match is conducted by Lycidas who appears as a shepherd singing about a friend of his and wishing him calm breezes on his voyage. The next emergence of the name Lycidas is found in Vergil's *IX Eclogue*, where there is a development upon the pastoral convention of responsive

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<sup>5</sup> Tragedy in the text should be viewed in the classical sense of that which is impiously deterministic, that which is fatal and ineluctable. Tragedy is the handling of man's burden, a burden extended to the phenomenon of death, an inexorable penalty hanging over man's original condition *qua* man, and not *qua* god. Moreover, tragedy in the sense of a paradise that has been lost, and man's continual effort to regain it. In contemporary terms, tragedy as man is determined by chance, by time, by geography, and ultimately, by language; that language determines what he thinks, how he acts, and who he is. Man's identity is either a dream (an illusion) or a ceaseless recreation. The dimension of the human condition and tragedy are death (finitude) as man's limitation, and hope as an inward structure for salvation, or for the finding of a paradise within.



song that leads to the interplay of monody and dialogue. If the poetic mode is the pastoral, the genre is the elegy, and the nearest formulations in the series of pastoral elegies as long as Milton is concerned were carried through from Marot, Ronsard, Sannazaro, Castiglione, to Spenser and Milton. The central claim of these commemorative poems is that the funeral song or *Lachrymae* perpetuates the life on earth of the deceased shepherd. The image in "Lycidas" of young shepherds being "nurst upon the self-same hill" (23) provides Milton's youthful speaker with the grounds to begin the threnody by mourning the death of his peerless fellow singer, and the classical and Italian models for the recreated power of death – the deceased lives on in the elegy.

Two shepherds may conduct the pastoral elegy in a singing match, or a single shepherd may perform the elegy before an audience and landscape characterized by their pastoralism. In "Lycidas," the speakers do not seem to be involved in an agon, their match is more likely to be a progressive process of a unified and true vision. Milton is the utterer of both utterances; he is the producer of the prophetic vision. Thus, it is no mistake that the speaker's lot remains simply abstract in "Lycidas"; if on the one hand Milton is himself the utterer as to what regards both voices (the swain's and the final voice), he is the producer of the speaker's text on the other hand. But Milton also answers the swain by utilizing another possible lyric persona. As to what concerns the song of the swain, the speaker is the uncouth swain, the one who sang Lycidas's death "to th'Oaks and rills." The reconstruction of the elegiac tradition, the difficult interplay of monody and dialogue, may be viewed as a defiance or progress made by a major poet unwilling to bow to lordly tradition: Milton converses with and gazes upon various speakers. Milton recreated and re-viewed the dialogue of voices and the play of gazes so that he would not be "With eager thought warbling his *Doric* lay" (189).

In regard to the dialogue and play of gazes, Lycidas's untimely death resembles the mythical pattern of death-and-rebirth because, along with Lycidas's glorification in heaven, "In solemn troops, and sweet Societies / That sing, and singing in their glory move, / And wipe the tears for ever from his eyes" (179-181), human life, like the body of Orpheus, is sometimes sacrificed so that crops and flowers sprout in a reflection of earlier pagan rituals. All man's individual aspirations, even if they are the highest ones, are thwarted in subjection to the cyclic and continual reabsorption of man into nature. If in a pagan universe, death reenacts life, in the Christian culture life is reenacted through repentance before death, followed by revelation and posterior salvation after death. This insistent metamorphosis or the tragic loss of purpose and identity revived by Lycidas implies a symbolic connection: the Orphic pattern of death-and-rebirth is the law of nature. It is the habit of man

to think of this sign in terms of a pattern, and it is the regular thing to happen. An existent pattern in death-and-rebirth is also a rule in the Christian culture, and this rule is exactly what will determine the Orphic side to the pattern.

The Orphic side to the pattern of death-and-rebirth in "Lycidas" is the modelling power of the archetypal poet: the myth whose narration of a second loss seems to inaugurate the possibility of revision and recreation through sparagmos (dismemberment). In the Renaissance, Orpheus' relation to Greek religion was vaguely known and his story was recounted simply as myth (Mayerson 1949:190). Nevertheless, the tradition persisted that the Thracian poet-priest had been the source of all Greek theology, and in addition, "the Jewish revelation, made to Moses, had filtered through to the Egyptians: Orpheus had read the Pentateuch in Egypt, and thus a line could be traced from Moses [to]... the *Orphica* to Plato: [Paganism,] Platonism and Christianity could thus be reconciled" (Carey and Fowler 1968:236). Also regarded as a harmonizing and civilizing figure, Orpheus in Milton's text is no more pagan than Moses and the Old Testament, and his ascension as well as Lycidas's occurs this way:

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, (...)  
So *Lycidas*, sunk low, but mounted high. (165-172)

Milton transfers the symbolic implications of the Orpheus myth to Lycidas's death and rebirth. The likenesses in Milton's allusion to Orpheus are heightened by an understanding of the probability that a common beginning (source) accounts for the fundamentally identical death-rebirth patterns of the myth and the elegy. Like Lycidas's, Orpheus' death is to be associated with water, and the dead identified with the sun.

The pattern of death-and-rebirth is inherent in the imagery of water as the prime source of fertility, the principle of life in ancient cults including Orpheus' (Langdon 1914:5-6). King died by drowning, so did Milton's Lycidas, and before him, Theocritus's Lycidas had wished a friend farewell on his sea-voyage. Orpheus was dismembered and his head floated on water. According to different mythologemes, a head that could still tell oracles. The killers of Orpheus were tormented until they took his head from water and gave it a proper burial. For those, whose death is met in water, and who escape interment, they are brought back to immortality by "O ye *Dolphins*, waft the hapless youth" (164). The descent into water which is often a feature of death-and-rebirth cycles offered Milton a larger range of death-



and-rebirth symbolism that goes back to his calling of the fountain Arethuse, his crowning of the river Mincius, and his bidding Alpheus his return. In all these references, as well as Orpheus' "gory visage down the stream was sent, / Down the swift *Hebrus* to the *Lesbian* shore," water seems to provide a kind of immortality that works as a provisional solution. Despite their determination to scorn delights and live laborious days, both Orpheus and Lycidas have gone to a watery death – death that reabsorbs the corpse in nature, and fertilizes it with a pagan immortal life. Perhaps that is the crux of all re-creative effort, a metamorphosis of Orphic eyes/I's.

Fertilization of vegetation through water and sun in pagan nature takes part in the conventions of the pastoral elegy. But so again does Orpheus: he succeeds in not succeeding. Singing of the rites of death, he reclaims part of his existence from dismemberment, silence and blindness, and reclaims part of our conventions from our small versions of oblivion. These conventions are appropriate to help formalize the referent in question because they are concerned with the problem and the mystery of death. The water and the sun imagery, especially in the figure of Phoebus Apollo, hinge the transition from pagan – "Sunk though he be beneath the wat'ry floor, / So sinks the day-star in the Ocean bed" – to Christian – "So *Lycidas*, sunk low, but mounted high" – apotheoses. The sun-god is said to have preserved Orpheus' head on the Lesbian shore after he had silenced its oracles. It was also this pagan deity who affirmed in "*Lycidas*" that life may be lost on earth but not due praise and fame in heaven: "*Phoebus* repli'd, and touch'd my trembling ears; / *Fame* is no plant that grows on mortal soil, .../ Of so much fame in Heav'n expect thy meed" (77-78,84). Numerous analogies between the conventions of fertility ritual by the sun, and those of the pastoral are exposed in the poem's long flower catalog. The laurel, the myrtle, and the ivy are evergreens and have been held sacred as they render the idea of immortality in the classical myths. Even the word and flower amaranth were coined to mean unfading. Not only does Milton attribute qualities and modes of being to Lycidas's death through vegetation, but he also shows that the principle of life, water, is not responsible for the object in question. The blame is on man, for the ship was "Built in th'eclipse, and rigg'd with curses dark" (101). Furthermore, in the manner of King's (and Orpheus') death, Lycidas's frustrates proper burial and mourning. Singing shepherds mourn him, and they shed a hyperbolic ocean of tears. Like King, and even Milton himself, Lycidas does not die in the minds of this world, for the divinating triumph of poetry and genius over oblivion grants a kind of life after death.

Milton chose the violent death of Orpheus to parallel Lycidas's; Orpheus' despair and hope for Eurydice direct Milton's discussion on immortal fame.

Such fame is the silence – Orpheus of the severed head – that speaks not only of vanishing points; it also sings, and therefore sees, on pain of universal entropy, a new kind of life. If on earth the three of them (King also) feel their poetry is like pearls cast before the swine during this “thin-spun life” (76), Milton’s heavenly patron, Christ, and not Phoebus Apollo, permits him a final reward “in the blest Kingdoms” (177). The sign’s latitude of interpretation is further advanced not only within the boundaries of natural language, but also towards a linguistic subsystem that, in the case, belongs to a mythical discourse. Various traditional myths, such as those of Orpheus and Eurydice, Prometheus, or Sisyphus, are said to be the human imagination in progress; the myth or the mythic realms seem inevitable and fill in a necessity of which the human being may be conscious or not. In the end, no matter how “immortally famous” one’s texts may become, reading and the reading of literature cannot plumb the depths of a work of art; for that depth remains an absence like a face without the eyes.

Thus, the Orpheus myth comes readily to mind as if Milton had been compelled involuntarily to associate all experience instantly with the mythic, indeed to comprehend experience via this association, like the Greeks, “whereupon even the immediate present necessarily appeared to them *sub specie aeterni* and in a sense as timeless.” Myth, moreover, as “unconscious metaphysics” or solace, “the mythical homeland” or “the mythic womb” (Nietzsche 1971:632-634) that suggests the autochthonous and preconscious, is not a (pre)selection of a conscious and manipulative mind. Myth may be thought as an indistinguishable entirety of image and meaning, or, as Nietzsche does when he separates “Mythus,” an allegorical vehicle expressing a conscious opinion (about perhaps religion and art), and the inherent (“Inhalt”) content of a myth from myth *per se*. Myth is thus not properly a matter of belief – one has to admit that one is able to approach the once-living reality of myth only by means of intellectual constructs – but a matter of how effectively it works to make the unanswerable, the tremendous gaps in human knowledge, the abyss between the divine and the profane, the pre-lapsarian and the acquired human condition, digestible. In case one were not at least dimly conscious of the horrible truth, one would have no incentive to renew most of the times that creative act by which humans maintain the mythical image. Again, myth in general, and the Orpheus myth in particular, are born on an unprecedented level of (im)purity, in a sophisticated (but not ornamental) art form, where it contributes to all degrees and stages of consciousness by providing visible (perceptual), and illustrative samples of nature and culture as a whole. The dismemberment of Orpheus in “Lycidas” may be a continuous process, just as literature may make and unmake itself indefinitely. This view accords with



the cyclical function of myth whether one knows that new beginnings do not coincide with old ends or not.

The rendering of the Orpheus myth in "Lycidas" with its attendant death-and-rebirth pattern serves Milton as a means to identify the sign system to which the sign belongs: a mythical discourse. This sign system, an abstruse area related to the fundamental nature of reality and being that includes ontology, cosmology, and epistemology, gives rise to other signs that move toward an ultimate interpretive sign. In this movement, or process, the idea of a relational sign is used as the scopic device with which the sign may be comprehended in its indeterminacy. In the text of "Lycidas," the relational sign is propositional: Milton's use of the sign death-and-rebirth is within (and beyond) the scope of the myth of Orpheus in its Renaissance conception. As to what concerns the Orpheus story, whether "mythographers interpreted the legend of his death as an allegory of human wisdom and art," or understood "the story to be a symbolic representation of the rise and fall of civilizations" (Mayerson 1949:189,193), the connotations of the Orpheus passages in "Lycidas" may be taken not only as a symbol of human reason and art, but also as a symbol of human defective wisdom in the face of his tragedy. The sign – the Orphic pattern of death-and-rebirth in "Lycidas" – will continue to be indeterminate and a mystery, for human reason cannot grasp the reasons why a youth may be plucked away from life before his prime, or why unseeing, downcast eyes are sometimes to be preferred. But this relational sign proposes reconciliation between Orpheus and Christ: in their respective ways, they symbolize a universal order. The analysis of the development of the relational sign in the poem showed how this synthesis was achieved and demonstrated the role of the Orpheus image in defining the terms of the conflict and in contributing to its resolution. This proposition is not supposed to be viewed in terms of "Lycidas" only: conflict, tragedy, and its (ir)resolution are part of a larger scheme, one of which "L'Allegro" and "Il Penseroso" are also constituents (Sá 1996). The provisional resolution that the relational sign in "Lycidas" leads to rests on the two different orders – human and divine – in the tragedy of life.

On the other hand, the argumentative quality of Milton's relational sign follows the teachings of the Orpheus myth in relation to the twice-lost Eurydice. Just like the archetypal poet, Milton's lyric persona (the speaker of the coda) and the uncouth swain (the speaker of the mournful song) fail to acknowledge "that there is no collaboration between nature and poet, which is to say, no unity of meaning between his own ideas and the government of things; and second, that there might be another order of experience in which Lycidas's death would not be anomalous but just" (Silver 1991:795). Lycidas's death is like perhaps Orpheus' descent and ascension from the underworld

without Eurydice, in much the same way his second loss proceeds to death, also reveal the incapacity of human knowledge, language, order, and eyes/I's to cope with limitations and to express the inexpressible. Orpheus' death, like Lycidas's and as a prefiguration of Christ's, inaugurates the possibility of a true creative human power. The relational sign is dynamic to the extent it sustains that the apprehension of that second loss depends rather on Milton's capacity to make the insufficiencies of the pastoral convention conspicuous, and to make the myth of Orpheus expressive of the inequity between ideas (idealizations) of the right order and the hardship of experience. The sense of human tragedy consists in this inequity: the apperception of two completely different orders. Whereas death, blindness/nearsightedness, loss, and finitude are the prerogative of the human order, absoluteness, infinity, optimum vision, and immortality make part of the claims of those who are said to belong to the divine order.

The two different orders are mirrored in the text of "Lycidas" by the appearance of the two speakers: the uncouth swain, and the persona of the coda. Interpreting "Lycidas" necessitates recognizing the rule-governed aspect taken over by Milton, by the utterer, and by the contextual aspect, left to the speaker himself, the uncouth swain. Utterer, speakers, and readers tend to mingle in the text of "Lycidas." There are two consequences for treating the speaker in "Lycidas" as a single dramatic figure (Milton's lyric persona): pastoral conventions are treated as his thoughts, attitudes, perceptions, and since convention is the antithesis of authentic individuality, the utterer, back of both his speakers (lyric persona and uncouth swain), would transmit inadequately opposing views. It is also for this reason that "Lycidas" has two speakers, so that the utterer may converse with them in terms of agreement or disagreement. Milton disagrees with one of his speakers in the poem on at least one matter: "But that two-handed engine at the door / Stands ready to smite once, and smite no more" (130-131). This speech act is delivered by "The Pilot of the *Galilean* lake" (109), Saint Peter, in the song of the swain, and as such, indirectly alludes to the "yet once more" formula. It is the threat of divine retribution cast upon sinners and whose content the speaker/uncouth swain thought would suit the occasion. In mourning his dead friend, the swain confirms Lycidas's righteousness through an ambivalent kind of rhetoric: once "Thee Shepherd, thee" (39) rose to heaven after thine death, it only means that Saint Peter did not smite thee, and it was a fortunate narrow escape. But,

were Saint Peter to threaten the clergy with divine wrath, he would be as guilty as the bishops who constrain and exploit their flocks by holding up to them the frightful image of Peter standing "ready to smite once, and smite no more." The Peter of the epistles insists that Christians imitate "the chief Shepherd" (1 Peter 5:4) (Mauro 1993:28).



Utterer and speaker are outraged by the corruption of the clergy and so they (but only the addresser in fact) mimic the bishops' teaching by making their words Saint Peter's. But Saint Peter rails against being characterized as such a vindictive engine of God when we realize that Milton is also found as a recipient of the swain's song, for Milton's lyric persona is addressed: he knew Peter's epistolary warnings against false teachers and seers were directed exclusively to salvation and yet he tyrannized the information. The informed readers are the ones to know the author's attempt to offer patience and better fortitude as alternatives. Besides, "Tomorrow to fresh Woods, and Pastures new" (193) echoes the perspective of driving the herd away from the unseeing corrupted bishopry, the hungry wolves and blind mouths, to seek better spiritual food.

Apart from the two completely different orders, Milton seems to convey the idea that disorder is present in the world. This disorder bursts out in blindness, a lack of vision. Blind is the fury that slits Lycidas's life, and even blinder are the mouths of the clergy: "here the similarity between wolves and a predatory clergy forms the obvious interpretive context for the phrase 'blind mouths'" (KAMINSKI 1995:484-485). But blind is also the one who does not know what to make of the order brought forth with the heavy change. The uncouth swain is the one at a loss, and he is named as such by Milton's lyric persona. In the eight last lines of "Lycidas," Milton shifts from first-person pastoral to third-person epic, thus proving the final distancing of both speakers (the two different gazes) and of the speaker from his intended audience (the swain's voice):

Thus sang the uncouth Swain to th'Oaks and rills,  
While the still morn went out with Sandals gray.  
He touch't the tender stops of various Quills,  
With eager thought warbling his *Doric* lay:  
And now the Sun had stretch'd out all the hills,  
And now was dropt into the Western bay;  
At last he rose, and twitch't his Mantle blue:  
Tomorrow to fresh Woods, and Pastures new. (186-193)

At the very end, the entire poem is framed as the process through which an uncouth swain has gone. "The uncouth as a rhetorical term is derived from the Greek *acryon*, which in Greek means that which is invalid, without authority, not dominant" (Patterson 1990:788). I would dare to add unseeing and blind. Why would Milton's lyric persona dismiss the swain's voice as uncouth? Why would Milton's lyric persona be remiss in accusing the swain also as unseeing? Perhaps the uncouth swain is Milton's treatment of

convention: Milton "made the pastoral surpass itself and then, at the crucial moments, turn and rend itself for being a false surmise" (Patterson 1990:793), for being an imagined inference carried out on slight grounds, and perhaps for being simply a line of sight. But uncouth tells of a gaze that is not dominant, instead of one that has been blindfolded. "If apprised of 'uncouth's' relation to the *other*, radical tradition" (Patterson 1990:793), the lyric persona of the coda simply thematizes the swain's gaze as an order where heavy changes and death are the blindfolding authorities. The *commiato* seems to beckon farewell to this order and to introduce a new order, one where death is only a temporary note, and possibly a note out of sight.

The purpose of this pastoral mode of utterance seems to rest upon the principle that the acts of man should not be confined to the promotion of his sole personal interests, or to the satisfaction of his desires; they should rather extend toward the category of *res non apparentes* (Silver 1991:787).<sup>6</sup> The opposition between gazes and voices enunciated in Milton's appropriation of the convention of the pastoral elegy places the textual and situational contexts in two modes of making meaning: the outward tokens of incongruity and incoherence of conventional structures in the swain's song consist in the manifest phenomena of the sign in question. The youthful uncouth swain of the elegy proper is taken aback by death, but:

for the speaker the vision of justice for Lycidas dissolves all the grounds of protest. For the poem itself the painful tensions are resolved through the quiet impersonality of a third-person perspective in the *ottava rima* stanza at the end, for which Milton imagines another, anonymous, voice, with a more predictably regular pattern of rhythm and rhyme (Reesing 1968:28).

At the end, a pattern of ordered rhythm and rhyme supervenes. Righteousness, a peculiar value Milton took for granted his intended audience dispensed, is revealed, so to speak, not only mediately, but also obliquely and ironically. If to the Orphic mind deconstruction of our artificial meaning structures is not a terminal condition, Milton reconstructs the pastoral idea of serenity and *otium* that effectively conceals a shepherd society stained with the refusal to accept limitations and death. But framing, and not limitation, is what the sign suggests to the reader. The Orphic pattern of death-and-rebirth is to the reader of "Lycidas" a force that makes him/her return to the

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<sup>6</sup> Silver states "that faith, like God, is an idea belonging to the category of *res non apparentes*, 'things that do not appear;' or as Hebrews 11.1 has it, 'faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.'"



beginning of the text and attempt a step beyond the *res apparentes*: but nothing is fully resolved. Just as in the myth of Orpheus, the mythical and narrative content of the story with its pattern of death-and-rebirth are placed on one side, whereas the myth's meaning exerts a secondary effect: the perlocutions of the Orpheus myth in "Lycidas" transitorily resolve a process of questioning man's tragic existence.

The perlocutionary effect of Orpheus in this poem enables Milton to discern prophecy and fragmentation in the Orphic voice, and by doing so, he fragmented the pastoral convention in face-value inconsistent tenses and uncertain structures and prophesied a kind of silence and entropy. Such entropic silence and dystopic blindness can only be connected to Orpheus' gaze: a "visionary" act that founds "writing because it crosses the threshold of death and seeks in vain to return to an immediacy of visual presence that cannot be restored. Eurydice's disappearance represents the futility of sight and the compensatory function of a literary surrogate (Orpheus' song)," (Jay 1994:553) which continuously opens up to the realm of what we now call literature. And yet, the game of prophecy is, as any play, both dreary and portentous: where the vanishing points of literature end, one may need, in the like of Orpheus and Lycidas, less primary vision and more second sight. And this is not the place for visions: "Look homeward Angel now, and melt with ruth" (163): "Lycidas"'s apparent disorder and final entropy may, after all, be Milton's way of demonstrating man's ignorance of a superior supervening order; an "ignorance" or blindness that vents itself in the perpetually thwarting of the desire for authorial presence, for textual closure, and for plenitudinous all-seeing meaning.



## ABSTRACT

In John Milton's "Lycidas" the allusions to the Orpheus myth will be analyzed through the perspective of a relational sign. Since the poem has different and opposing gazes incorporated into the text, the Renaissance rewriting of the Orpheus myth will be associated with the changes of gazes, will be assessed as the modeling frame that underlies the transitions from an innocent to an enlightened viewpoint, and will be focused as the fragmented configuration of consciousness in the process of defining two orders of existence: the human and the divine.

## KEY-WORDS

gaze, viewpoint, Orpheus, Milton.

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