

On the Value of *Lycidas*

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Lycidas is one of the most widely and highly valued poems ever written. Critics have called it “the high-water mark of English Poesy and of [John] Milton’s own production,”¹ considered it “probably the most perfect piece of pure literature in existence,”² held “it to be the greatest short poem of any author in English, the very criterion and touchstone of poetical taste,”³ and declared it “the most perfect poem of its length in the English language.”⁴ Examples of such hyperbolic praise abound in *Lycidas* criticism, and they bear witness to the delight which has drawn readers continuously and repeatedly to the poem.⁵

This essay attempts to explain how *Lycidas* engenders such passionate responses. To address that question I will conduct a close reading that borrows strategies from several critical schools but uses them to focus on the topic of aesthetic delight. Although I discuss image patterns,⁶ I do not use them to praise the well-wrought formal perfection of the poem; though I focus frequently on textual incoherence, I do not attempt to deconstruct western metaphysics; and when I describe the moment-by-moment responses of a reader, I do not look for anxiety or didactic guilt. I do try to explain how the text generates a pleasurable experience. Instead of attempting to justify this critical strategy in the abstract, I present the following reading of *Lycidas* as an example of my method in operation.

In focusing on why people like the things they like, I am following the lead of Stephen Booth, who has offered the

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following generalizations about how great works of art work on an audience:

Great works of art are daredevils. They flirt with disasters and, at the same time, they let you know they are married forever to particular, reliable order and purpose. They are, and seem often to work hard at being, always on the point of one or another kind of incoherence—always on the point of disintegrating and/or of integrating the very particulars they exclude—always and multifariously on the point of evoking suggestions of pertinent but syntactically impertinent auxiliary assertions and even saying things they cannot want to say, things irrelevant or antipathetic to their arguments or plain untrue.⁷

Lycidas exemplifies such daredevil greatness on several levels. The poem employs patterns of structure, prosody, and imagery to maintain a dynamic coherence. The syntax of the poem is full of “impertinent auxiliary assertions” that contribute valuably to the experience of the poem. *Lycidas* also flirts with disaster by including examples of total, yet glorious, nonsense that enrich the experience of reading the poem.

G. Wilson Knight says, “*Lycidas* reads rather as an effort to bind and clamp together a universe trying to fly off into separate bits; it is an accumulation of magnificent fragments.”⁸ These comments imply that the poem lacks unity, but I think they describe the peculiar kind of unity that *Lycidas* possesses. Knight’s description of the poem seems to me accurate and valuable because it registers the sense that *Lycidas* is an object under continual internal pressure, that it seems always about to explode. I would like to examine the way the poem simultaneously threatens and prevents that explosion.

Lycidas is indeed a peculiar poem. It is a “monody” in which multiple voices speak; the flower catalogue seems, as do several other passages in the poem, an extravagant digression; the rhyme and meter are irregular. Such observations, among others, have led critics to question the coherence of the poem. I submit that *Lycidas* does not cohere in any single system of organization but in a multitude of overlapping patterning systems. A critic examining one pattern will probably find inadequacies and flaws. Such a critic fails to recognize that since the multiple patterns in *Lycidas* overlap, the loose ends of any one pattern disappear into the interweavings of the others. To give some sense of the densely designed fabric of *Lycidas*, I will examine its structure, prosody, and image patterns.

Many critics adopt some version of Arthur Barker's analysis of *Lycidas*'s structure, that breaks the poem into three movements. According to Barker, "*Lycidas* consists of an introduction and conclusion, both pastoral in tone, and three movements, practically equal in length and precisely parallel in pattern. Each begins with an invocation of pastoral muses (lines 15, 85, and 132), proceeds with conventions drawn from the tradition of the pastoral elegy . . . and ends with the formulation and resolution of Milton's emotional problem."⁹ What makes Barker's organizational scheme truly remarkable is that it uses the very elements that threaten the unity of the poem to generate a coherent structure. The three movements Barker outlines hinge on the speeches by Phoebus and St. Peter. Their pronouncements lead the poem off into realms of thought only tangentially related to its main topic. But the very repetition of the digressive monologue helps give the poem a formal coherence. The same elements that lead *Lycidas* astray serve simultaneously to keep it on track.

In another account of the structure of *Lycidas*, J. Martin Evans divides the poem into two movements. Each movement contains six sections, and the sections mirror one another.¹⁰ The second movement is nearly twice as long as the first, and the individual sections that mirror each other also vary widely in length. For instance, the fifth section of the second movement goes from line 165 to 185, making it nearly four times as long as the parallel passage in movement one: lines 58–63. Thus Evans's complexly asymmetrical scheme reveals how widely separated passages of various length fit together in a larger ideational design. Moreover, his structural analysis cuts across the one put forth by Barker.

I do not intend to choose between the structures proposed by Barker and Evans. I believe both accounts (and numerous others, such as Tillyard's division of the poem into four sections) accurately describe one organizing pattern operative in the poem.¹¹ Juxtaposing these analyses, however, makes it obvious that no single pattern holds *Lycidas* together. What makes *Lycidas* exceptional is the number, variety, and complexity of organizational patterns it includes.

Another formal system of coherence in the poem is its prosody, which F. T. Prince has shown derives from Italian verse forms:

Lycidas consists of eleven "verse-paragraphs" of lengths varying from ten to thirty-three lines, closely but irregularly rhymed, and including ten lines, scattered throughout, which do not

rhyme at all . . . The six-syllable lines are disposed as irregularly as the rhymes . . . they are used somewhat sparingly, and they always rhyme, and always with a ten-syllable line which has gone before.¹²

Notice that even within the verse structure, several patterns overlap: stanza division, rhyme scheme, and meter. Moreover, each of these patterns of organization seems more or less disorganized. Stanza length varies randomly, unrhymed lines mix indiscriminately with rhymed ones, and short lines occur irregularly throughout the poem. The formal systems of prosody in the poem include chaotic elements. Such inclusion, I submit, is the function of all the systems of formal coherence in the poem. *Lycidas* coheres in so many interweaving patterns that a gap in any one pattern will be filled in by the smooth progress of the others. Taken together, the various patterns manage to contain the incoherent elements present in individual patterns.

Consider the matrix of formal patterns in the second verse-paragraph:

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 destined urn,
And as he passes turn,
And bid fair peace be to my sable shroud.
For we were nursed upon the self-same hill,
Fed the same flock; by fountain, shade, and rill.¹³

This is the shortest verse-paragraph in the poem. Lines 15 and 22 are unrhymed; the other lines are couplets, making the rhyme scheme: *x aa bb cc y dd*. Lines 19 and 21 are six-syllable lines; all the others are ten-syllable lines. So lines 15 and 22 break the rhyme scheme but fit the metrical pattern. Conversely, lines 19 and 21 rhyme but break the metrical pattern. This verse-paragraph is also organized syntactically as three sentences of varying length: three lines, five lines, two lines. In the final two lines of the verse-paragraph, the syntactic unit and the formal unit made by the couplet rhyme coincide. The formal separation of this couplet is strengthened because line 22 has ended with both an unrhymed word and a period. The unrhymed line 22, while it does not conclude the verse-paragraph (that began with

another unrhymed line), *does* conclude the first section in Evans's scheme. Line 22 also echoes line 20 because both are ten-syllable lines that do not rhyme with the six-syllable lines that precede them. In Barker's scheme, this verse-paragraph begins the first movement of the poem, following a fourteen-line prologue. Note that unrhymed line 15, that begins both the verse-paragraph and the section, echoes line 1, the unrhymed line that begins the whole poem. The verse-paragraph also coheres in various patterns of repetition (like repetitions of initial words: "Begin" in lines 15 and 17, and "And" in lines 21 and 22) and various phonetic patterns (like the dense alliteration of *s* sounds: "sisters of the sacred," "seat of Jove doth spring," "somewhat loudly sweep the string," "So may some," "passes," "peace be to my sable shroud," "nursed upon the self-same"). This analysis hardly exhausts the formal patterns that organize the stanza, but this sample of patterns from lines 15 to 24 helps demonstrate the point that the structure of *Lycidas* is one in which multiple patterns and structures overlap. The density and variety of those patterns make the stanza a good emblem for the structure of the poem as a whole.

It may seem that I have belabored a point that seems hardly worth making. The reason I have spent time demonstrating the overlapping patterns that occur in *Lycidas* is that I believe they contribute significantly to the value of the poem. What that plethora of patterns does for a reader is to make a poem openly artificial and brazenly arbitrary in its digressions and in its formal irregularity *also*—paradoxically—a poem in which every element *also* feels natural and pertinent. Prince recognizes this when he discusses the way Milton regularly separates the structures of syntax and prosody in *Lycidas*; "the failure of Milton's sentences to correspond to the pattern of rhymes [makes] the ebb and flow of statement, the pauses and new departures, appear to be independent of any necessity but their own."¹⁴ Examining a similar dynamic of multiple patterning in Shakespeare's *Sonnets*, Booth suggests, "An awareness of the multiplicity of the designs . . . contributes one source for an explanation of the sense that the best of Shakespeare's sonnets give of rightness, inevitability, and incontrovertible truth."¹⁵ This sense of order in chaos is especially powerful in *Lycidas* because the poem uses it to contain its topic: the arbitrary and disturbing fact of Edward King's accidental and untimely death.

The wealth of image patterns in *Lycidas* that serve to knit the poem together also help give coherence to its disturbing subject matter. Critics have been harvesting image patterns for some

time now, and several scholars have analyzed such patterns in *Lycidas*, especially the water-image and plant-image patterns.¹⁶ Such critics typically attempt to interpret the patterns they find by making them bearers of heretofore hidden meanings. Thus for Brooks and Hardy, the water images articulate the theme of death and resurrection. I, however, want to explore what such patterns *do*, how and what they contribute to the experience of the poem. I submit that, like the other patterns of organization and prosody I have examined, the image patterns in *Lycidas* contribute an extralogically powerful sense of coherence to the poem.

Like all the other patterns in *Lycidas*, the patterns of imagery are both multiple and overlapping. As M. H. Abrams points out, the poem "incorporates many water and sheep-and-shepherd images; it also has song-and-singer images, flower images, stellar images, wide-ranging geographical images, even a surprising number of eye, ear, and mouth images."¹⁷ I would like to examine that last set of images, the one Abrams finds "surprising," to demonstrate how image patterns function in the poem. Compared to the other image patterns, the face imagery in *Lycidas* has received little critical attention. Unlike the others, it does not fit readily into any handy interpretive schema; that makes it ideal for my purposes here.

Several gratuitously prominent references to hair fit into the pattern of similar, similarly fleeting, references to other facial features, like eyes, ears, and mouths. The poem mentions "the tangles of Neara's hair," tells us that St. Peter "shook his mitred locks," and situates Lycidas where "With nectar pure his oozy locks he laves" (lines 69, 112, and 175). This hair-image pattern relates Neara, St. Peter, and Lycidas. Whatever meaning or significance one attributes to this relation (and I see none), it possesses a specific aesthetic value. It places three otherwise unrelated elements of the poem into a system of relationship and so helps, in a small way, to magnify the sense the poem gives that its insistently random elements are not random.

What makes the face-image pattern particularly valuable, and particularly resistant to most critical strategies, is that it not only establishes extralogical coherence within its own terms but also overlaps with the other image patterns in *Lycidas*, thus enhancing their designs. It overlaps with the water imagery ("His gory visage down the stream was sent," "That sunk so low that sacred head of thine," "And wipe the tears for ever from his eyes"), the shepherd imagery ("Such, Lycidas, thy loss to shepherd's ear"), the flower imagery ("Throw hither all your quaint

enamelled eyes, / That on the green turf suck the honied showers"), the stellar imagery ("Flames in the forehead of the morning sky"), and the geographical imagery ("the shaggy top of Mona high") (lines 62, 102, 181, 49, 139–40, 171, and 54).

Such multiple intersections of image patterns are common in *Lycidas*. Consider the overlapping images in these lines: "Together both, ere the high lawns appeared / Under the opening eye-lids of the morn" (lines 25–6). The phrase "eye-lids of the morn" fits simultaneously into the face, flower, and stellar image patterns. That multilayered image dovetails with the geographical imagery of "high lawns." Such a dense weave of incidental image patterns does for the poem what the various, overlapping structural and prosodic patterns do. Like the simpler patterns they provide a comforting sense of coherence, but because the patterns in *Lycidas* are so many and so complex, they provide coherence without the attendant sense of artificial limitation such formal patterns typically include. Booth discusses the action of such densely packed patterns on readers of Shakespeare's *Sonnets*:

The mere fact of their presence adds to the reader's sense that he is engaged in an ordered, coherent, nonrandom, humanly geared experience. They help the poem give a sense of the intense and universal relevance of all things to all other things. The companion fact of their great number helps maintain in the reader an accompanying sense that, for all the artistic order of his reading experience, it is not a limited one . . . The reader is engaged in so many organizations that the experience of the poem is one both of comprehending (for which order, limit, pattern, and reason are necessary) and of having comprehended what remains incomprehensible because it does not seem to have been limited.¹⁸

As Booth suggests, the value of such complex, multiple ordering is that it gives the reader the paradoxical capacity to comprehend the incomprehensible.

Critics who challenge the unity of *Lycidas* are correct; no formal pattern provides unity to the poem. They are also incorrect; the juxtaposition of so many patterning systems, each individually inadequate to hold *Lycidas* together, does provide the poem with unity. As John Frank has noted, "Line by line the poem can be viewed as a medley of irresolutions, conventions, fragments. Yet the ensemble—the performance—seems resolved, unique, unified."¹⁹ The peculiar patternings of *Lycidas*

contribute significantly to its value to readers by enabling them to perceive order *in* chaos, as opposed to replacing the chaos with a carefully rearranged selection from the jumble of the chaos's elements.

The moment-by-moment unfolding of the syntax in *Lycidas* is another feature of the poem that enhances its value as an experience for readers. The experience of reading *Lycidas* includes many half-formed assertions antithetical or irrelevant to the syntax in which they nest. Because such shadow assertions dissolve in passage, they enrich the poem by letting it evoke considerations foreign to its surface concerns.

The poem's enjambments superimpose the structures of syntax and lineation. The friction generated between the two structures creates many of the shadow assertions that animate the poem. A typical example of such actions occurs in these lines:

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

(lines 42–4)

William Bowman Piper provides a succinct and illuminating analysis of these lines:

By the end of the first line, to which both the paired trees and the elliptical suspension of "green" give considerable integrity, I am apparently presented with an abundance of visually impressive foliage. In the second line, however, which is strongly stopped by the apparent completion of a sentence, by the metrical terseness of the line, and by the emphatic rhyme, this foliage is snatched from my view. Such an impression is strengthened by the heavy phrase "no more" and by the universal implications of the passive voice of the verb. Nevertheless, in the third line, the foliage is gradually recreated. In the first half of this line, I find it in the condition of a cardboard prop of sorts, "no more . . . / Fanning [its] joyous Leaves": present again although strangely stiff. But this is all corrected in the last half of the line, in which I enjoy all this fanning foliage, despite the absence of the dead shepherd's music, in as hopeful, lively, and abundant a condition as ever.²⁰

The special impact of these lines derives from the power of the enjambment to play peek-a-boo with the foliage. Stanley Fish, in a similar analysis, shows how the lines first evoke then remove

Nature's sympathy for Lycidas.²¹ These lines contain within themselves momentary assertions ("the foliage is gone," "Nature is sympathetic") that contradict the final assertions the lines make. Those fleeting assertions are part of what the poem does that makes readers value it. Fish sees the swift revision the lines call for as a didactic exercise that educates readers by belittling them. According to Fish, the "new meaning does not simply displace, but mocks the old: 'how foolish of anyone to believe that nature takes notice of the misfortunes of man.'" ²² I see such shadow assertions not as didactic and belittling but rather as delightful and enlarging. Such effects make the experience of reading *Lycidas* include more than the experience of understanding what the poem says or means.

The poem is full of such incidental, enriching effects. Look, for instance, at the multiple incidental actions included in the following lines:

Meanwhile the rural ditties were not mute,
 Tempered to the oaten flute,
 Rough satyrs danced, and fauns with cloven heel,
 From the glad sound would not be absent long.

(lines 32–5)

The enjambment between lines 34 and 35 creates a momentary assertion that contradicts the final statement the lines make. As it is read, line 34 says that both the satyrs and the fauns danced. When the syntax continues into line 35, however, a reader comes to understand that the fauns were not dancing with the satyrs but that they "would not be absent long" from the "glad sound." The fauns were not dancing to the music, but they will be before long, although we have in effect seen them dancing already. Such feats of mental gymnastics are commonplace for a reader of *Lycidas*. Consider the double syntax that hinges on line 33: "Tempered to the oaten flute." As we read through the lines, we comprehend line 33 in two separate syntactic organizations. First, lines 32 and 33 are understood as meaning "The rural ditties, that were tempered to the oaten flute, were not mute." The couplet structure of *mute/flute* reinforces this understanding by providing a sense of closure to the lines. As we read further, however, we come to a new understanding of line 33 as modifying "Rough satyrs."²³ Like the enjambments, double syntax enhances the experience of the poem by expanding the limits of what logic and grammar dictate sentences can deliver to a reader. An auxiliary enlarging effect in these lines comes

from the use of negative assertions: "were not mute" and "would not be absent long." Such assertions, not uncommon in *Lycidas*, achieve effective definition with minimal limitation. The rural ditties, since described only as "not mute," can be thought to include all qualities except silence; the description of them, while specific, is virtually unlimited.

Another example of the effects and effectiveness of enjambment in *Lycidas* occurs in lines 119 and 120: "Blind mouths! that scarce themselves know how to hold / A sheep-hook." Before line 120 continues the syntax, line 119 can be understood to mean "Blind mouths! that do not know how to hold themselves." Line 120 makes it a sheep-hook, rather than themselves, that the blind mouths do not know how to hold. A kind of intraline enjambment occurs in line 119 itself. The phrase "Blind mouths! that scarce themselves know" forms a potentially complete syntactic unit, implying that the blind mouths lack self-knowledge. The phrase "how to hold" revises that meaning, and the next line revises it yet again. Again, such microrevisions enlarge the poem, make it contain more meanings than a paraphrase of its contents could hold, by introducing assertions not included in the meaning the lines ultimately deliver.

As line 119 suggests, dissolving shadow assertions can occur within lines as well as across them. Look at line 192, for example: "At last he rose, and twitched his mantle blue." Here is Piper's sensitive analysis of the line:

The parallel between "rose" and "twitch'd"—a troublesome word at best—suggests that "twitch'd," like "rose," has no object, that a caesura follows this term and, thus, that the mourner, at the end of the agonies presented in the poem, is terribly and, indeed, pitifully shaken. As a reader pushes to the line-end he no doubt finds a possible object for "twitch'd," however, that allows him to correct such an impression. I say "possible object" because the half-line, "his Mantle blew"—the last word of which appeared, indeed, as "*blew*" in the 1638 edition—may more normally constitute a complete independent clause: he rose and twitched; his mantle blew.²⁴

The line is further complicated by the intricate, and unexploited, play on "rose" and "blue." The word "rose" functions here as a verb describing a physical motion, but it can also designate a color—significantly, in a poem containing a gratuitous flower

catalogue, the color of a flower. On the other hand, "blue" here denotes a color, but its homophone "blew" can function as a verb of motion.

Such effects in *Lycidas* often hinge on the double meanings of single words. For instance, in lines 27 and 28 ("We drove a-field, and both together heard / What time the grey-fly winds her sultry horn"), the potential of "heard" to mean "to drive a group of animals" and/or "listened" makes line 27 describe the actions of shepherding, until line 28 makes the second half of 27 describe the action of listening. A similar example occurs in lines 123 and 124: "And when they list, their lean and flashy songs / Grate on their scrannel pipes of wretched straw." The double meanings of "list" energize the lines by making them mean first, "When they listen to their songs" and then, "When they please, they make their songs sound grating." Examples of such fleeting irrelevancies abound in *Lycidas*.

The various shadow assertions outlined above present meanings either incompatible with or irrelevant to the larger assertion in which they reside. A related effect occurs through the operations of undelivered meanings. The word "list" in line 123 provides an excellent example. The meaning of the word changes from "listen" to "please" as the lines are read, but "list" is also a nautical term meaning "inclined to one side." While nothing in the syntax of the lines serves to activate that meaning, it does pertain to the theme of sinking ships in the poem. That undelivered meaning functions like the more blatant image patterns in the poem; it provides an incidental, insignificant coherence to the poem.

Another example of this effect occurs in line 16 on the word "spring." In lines 15 and 16 the speaker says, "Begin then, sisters of the sacred well, / That from beneath the seat of Jove doth spring." The verb "spring" describes the action of the sacred well. The term is especially appropriate for describing the actions of the well because "spring" can also mean a place where water wells up from the ground. Moreover, the undelivered meaning of "spring" (namely, "the season between winter and summer") provides an extralogical coherence with the earlier terms of the poem. In the opening verse-paragraph of the poem, the speaker harvests berries "before the mellowing year," and feels compelled "to disturb your season due: / For Lycidas is dead, dead ere his prime" (lines 5 and 7-8). Thus the poem has already introduced the topic of the seasons, a topic echoed by the undelivered meaning of "spring" a few lines later. Note too that "prime," which in line 8 means "maturity," is a term which

can mean "springtime" and thus fits into the intricate series of references to seasons.

Consider, as a final example from the ideational underworlds of *Lycidas*, the actions of line 9: "For Lycidas is dead, dead ere his prime, / Young Lycidas, and hath not left his peer" (lines 8–9). Here the context demands that line 9 mean "Young Lycidas, to whom no one alive is equal." But the careful phrasing also allows the line to mean, "Young Lycidas, who has not abandoned his friend," i. e., who is not dead. For a moment, the poem flirts with the idea of bringing Lycidas back to life. Thus the line manages to introduce into the poem an idea antithetical to it. That effect gets enhanced by the undelivered pun on *peer*/*pier*. The idea of Lycidas's never leaving his pier (never setting sail in that fatal and perfidious bark) helps plant the theme of resurrection, which figures prominently in the poem's closing movement, in its early lines. The pun on *peer* is a far-fetched one that remains purely potential here, but it nevertheless foreshadows a major thematic movement of the poem.

One difficulty inherent in such analyses of the momentary actions that poems perform on the understanding of their readers is that describing them almost unavoidably inflates their actual effect on a reader, and the exaggeration may tempt readers of the analysis to dismiss such effects as the product of wanton critical ingenuity. All those shadow assertions and undelivered meanings do, I believe, occur in the minds of readers as they make their way through *Lycidas*. However, they never threaten or impede a reader's progress through the lines.

I believe the ease with which a reader assimilates such alien assertions enhances their value. Negotiating the syntactic thickets of *Lycidas* is like negotiating a mental minefield; every shadow assertion threatens the smooth surface coherence of the poem by introducing alien ideational matter into it. Successfully completing that mental obstacle course is an exhilarating achievement of mental athleticism. Moreover, since all the alien meanings are not simply present but momentarily active in the reader's mind, he or she enjoys the thrill of exploding every mine in the path and not only surviving but hardly even flinching.

I have discussed both the various systems of coherence in *Lycidas* that work together to give the poem an irrationally powerful sense of relevance and order and some of the various half delivered and undelivered meanings of words and phrases that energize the poem. Now I want to turn to those effects in the poem by which the reader's mind is taken beyond the limits of human reason.

A good place to begin analyzing such effects is with what the *Variorum* editors call "the most debated crux in Milton."²⁵ I refer, of course, to the couplet that ends St. Peter's speech: "But that two-handed engine at the door, / Stands ready to smite once, and smite no more" (lines 130–1). The need to define "two-handed engine" has put scholarly minds in a panic, producing a vast body of commentary ranging from the ingenious to the ludicrous. I submit that the panic exists not because critics do not understand the lines but because they do understand them. To a reader making his or her way through the poem, "that two-handed engine" presents no obstacle to comprehension. Once the reader becomes a critic, however, "that two-handed engine" becomes a problem because it is no longer clear just what has been comprehended. So, critics begin pillaging various contexts—the Bible, historical backgrounds, Milton's other works, and so on—in a desperate attempt to prove that the meaning of "two-handed engine" is as clear as their reading experience assures them that it is. The "two-handed engine" crux provides ample validation of Booth's assertion that many of the poems we value most are "satisfying to read, unsatisfying to think about, and likely to evoke critical analyses that satisfy only by *making* the poem satisfying to think about."²⁶

Although no one can satisfactorily gloss "two-handed engine," every reader understands it. As we read these lines, the indicative adjective "that" assures us that we do indeed know exactly what the "two-handed engine" is. The lines thus give us momentary possession of knowledge that remains beyond our comprehension. By enabling us to incorporate something we do not actually comprehend into our minds, that line gives us a brief and trivial, but nevertheless genuine, experience of transcending the limits of the human mind.

Much of that sense of effortless comprehension of the incomprehensible is generated by the way the lines echo various other structures in the poem. For instance, the demonstrative "that" occurs only four times in the poem. In three of those cases, "that" signals some potentially destructive force: "Fame . . . / (*That* last infirmity of noble mind)," "*that* fatal and perfidious bark," and "*that* perilous flood" (lines 70–1, 100, and 185; emphasis added).²⁷ So "that two-handed engine" in line 130 fits into a pattern of destructive forces, each clearly identified by the word "that." Also, the phrase "Stands ready to smite once, and smite no more" echoes "Yet once more, O ye laurels, and once more," and both of those lines are echoed by "Weep no more, woeful shepherds weep no more" (lines 1, 165). By fitting so

tightly into this network of echoes and repetitions, the “two-handed engine” gains an illogically powerful sense of rightness.

The “two-handed engine” is only the most famous among a series of similar effects, effects whose incomprehensibility has not troubled critics quite so much. Consider the following line: “Sleep’st by the fable of Bellerus old” (line 160). Most critical commentary on this line focuses on the name “Bellerus.” As John Carey notes in his edition, “‘Bellerus’ seems to be an eponymous hero invented by M.[ilton] to explain the name *Bellerium* (the Latin name for Land’s End), found on Ortelius’s map of Britain.”²⁸ Woodhouse and Bush express only a vague dis-ease with the line: “Though the general meaning is plain, the phrasing is curious and perhaps unique.”²⁹ They never bother to explain what exactly the plain general meaning is. Paul Alpers does register some of the strangeness of the line: “It is intensely textual, as we can see by asking either how one can sleep by a fable or how ‘the fable of Bellerus old’ can refer, as it does, to Land’s End, a real place.”³⁰ Alpers is thus the only critic who comes close to acknowledging that the line is sheer nonsense.

It is not possible to sleep by a fable, and it is doubly impossible because the “fable” in question evidently does not exist. Nevertheless, this line does in fact conjure up that impossible action and deliver it to our minds. The word “by” in this line can indicate either location—“sleep beside the fabled Bellerus”—or instrumentality—“sleep according to the fable about Bellerus.” The union of those two separate and illogical readings probably contributes to the line’s power. Since a reader can comprehend the line in two ways at once, she or he presumably ignores the patent nonsense of the phrase. Moreover, this line follows a previous potential location for Lycidas’s body:

Whether beyond the stormy Hebrides
Where thou perhaps under the whelming tide
Visit’st the bottom of the monstrous world
Or . . .

(lines 156–9)

The contextual certainty that line 160 refers to an alternative location for Lycidas’s body, namely, “Land’s End,” helps a reader accept the nonsensical line without effort. The phrase “Sleep’st by the fable of Bellerus old” thus enables its readers to take sense from nonsense; it provides a handy container for concepts which the rational mind cannot comprehend and does so without shrinking them to logical size. Like the “two-handed

engine," line 160 creates a trivial but true experience of super-human mental capacity.

Another improbable victory over the forces of logic occurs for the reader in lines 88 and 89: "But now my oat proceeds, / And listens to the herald of the sea." These lines assert that the "oat," the pastoral song (echoing the "oaten flute" in line 33), "*listens* to the herald of the sea." Woodhouse and Bush attempt to gloss that curious construction: "Editors generally . . . neglect this peculiar, if readily intelligible, use of the word. Jerram explains [it] as the poet listening like a pupil, that he may know what to say. This is true, but not quite adequate. It is the song that is said to listen; i.e. really the auditors listen through the instrumentality of the song, as they have just listened to the words of Phoebus."³¹ Though they do well in correcting Jerram's substitute of something probable for what the lines actually say, the *Variorum* editors falter when they try to provide their own substitute. The *Variorum* gloss on "listens to" is a valiant, though unnecessary and futile, attempt to help the phrase make logical sense. Only a desperate critic reflecting in tranquility could imagine that these lines actually deliver the meaning invented for them by the *Variorum* editors. Moreover, because the lines are "readily intelligible," as the editors themselves admit, they actually need no aid to deliver meaning.

But what meaning do these lines deliver? The answer is simple but mind boggling. The lines apparently enable a reader to imagine a song listening to a god and to do so without the kind of frail parachute of rationality provided by Woodhouse and Bush. It is, of course, not possible to imagine a song listening—just try. Nevertheless, the lines do enable their readers to conceive that inconceivable phenomenon. Once more, the poem permits its readers to surpass the limits of their own minds.

Lycidas is full of similar effects that enable transcendence of presumed mental limitations. John Creaser has commented on the "inventive idiosyncrasy" of *Lycidas*:

It is a poem where the wind parches a body floating in the sea, where a tear is melodious, where the act of *turning* implies making a *verse*, where a fly has a "sultry horn," where flocks fatten on dew, where the Fates are Furies, where ears tremble, where rugged wings blow from beakéd promontories, where a flower is woeful yet in more than one sense "sanguine," where a star is black, where eyes suck and can be thrown, where a pink is white and the jet of mourning flecks a flower capriciously,

where shores wash a body far away, where the domain of sea-beasts seems to exemplify the whole "monstrous world," where the ocean is at once a floor and a bed, and where the morning has opening eyelids and the sky a forehead.³²

All the phenomena Creaser lists contribute to the value of the poem because they enable their readers to accept, effortlessly, impossible and illogical ideas and images and not only not to trouble over their impossibility and illogic but actually to take sense from their senseless assertions.

Rosemond Tuve says, "*Lycidas* is the most poignant and controlled statement in English poetry of the acceptance of that in the human condition which seems to man unacceptable," and she considers the entire poem an "attempt to relate understandably to human life the immutable fact of death."³³ Much of the value of this poem lies in the undeniable sense of consolation it provides in the face of death. I believe that consolation, however, does not reside in what the poem says. In its contents, *Lycidas* is as feeble and inadequate as any of the stock phrases or the thousands of lesser elegies that attempt vainly to console the grieving. Yet *Lycidas* does manage, as stock consolations and other elegies do not, to console. Why?

I submit that the experience of the poem as I have analyzed it contributes significantly to that consolation. All the phenomena I have discussed share the same physics. They all enable the reader to overcome threats to coherence and order—whether on the level of the poem's unity, a line's syntax, or a metaphor's rationality. All those threats are effortlessly overcome; they are also all trivial. But by giving us a continuous, genuine experience of coping with insignificant threats to our standards of coherence and order, *Lycidas* allows us to experience in miniature the mental capacity we would need to cope with less trivial threats. *Lycidas* deals with a tragic death; the very occurrence of such a tragic event threatens our sense of comprehensible order in the world. Although *Lycidas* cannot make death comprehensible to us, it can and does temporarily embolden our minds by offering us a token experience of superhuman mental capacity.

For the dozen or fifteen minutes it takes to read *Lycidas*, a reader's mind effortlessly finds order in chaos and takes sense from nonsense. The poem *Lycidas* is an enabling action for the human mind that empowers us to move, albeit in baby steps, towards the superhuman capacity that would allow us to comprehend death as well.

No wonder we enjoy it.³⁴

NOTES

¹Quoted from Mark Pattison's *Milton* (1879) in A. S. P. Woodhouse and Douglas Bush, *The Minor English Poems*, vol. 2, bk. 2, in *A Variorum Commentary on the Poems of John Milton*, ed. Merritt Y. Hughes (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1972), p. 568.

²Quoted from Arthur Machen's *Hill of Dreams* (1907) in Scott Elledge, ed., *Milton's "Lycidas"* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), p. 244.

³Paul Elmer More, *On Being Human* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1936), p. 190.

⁴J. B. Leishman, *Milton's Major Poems*, ed. Geoffrey Tillotson (Pittsburgh: Univ. of Pittsburgh Press, 1969), p. 271.

⁵One famous exception to the all-but-universal praise the poem has received is Dr. Samuel Johnson's critique of *Lycidas*. I will not deal with Johnson's critique for several reasons. First, Johnson himself acknowledges how anomalous his opinion is ("One of the poems on which much praise has been bestowed is *Lycidas*" [quoted from Johnson's *Lives of the Poets* in Woodhouse and Bush, p. 566]). Second, Johnson's evaluation of the poem rests on critical principles that are, at best, questionable, like the "sincerity" of the author or the "credibility" of pastoral conventions.

⁶I use the term "image pattern" here and later in the essay with some trepidation. The term implies that the patterns it labels evoke pictures in the minds of audiences. Language can, of course, invite its auditors to envision things, but the phenomena labeled "image patterns" are usually patterns of language not, necessarily, of images. Also, the term has become associated with New Critical, thematic criticism and often serves as a prelude to a revelation of the unifying theme of a work. Despite these unfortunate connotations, the term does provide a well-established, efficient, and readily comprehensible label for a certain kind of patterning I want to discuss.

⁷Stephen Booth, "The Unobserved of All Observers: The Gettysburg Address" (paper presented at the English Institute, Cambridge MA, 1976).

⁸G. Wilson Knight, *The Burning Oracle: Studies in the Poetry of Action* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1939), p. 70.

⁹Arthur Barker, "The Pattern of Milton's *Nativity Ode*," *UTQ* 10, 2 (January 1941): 167-81, 171-2.

¹⁰The movements and sections J. Martin Evans proposes run like this:

First Movement:

1-22 pluck/shroud

23-36 ideal shepherds

37-49 return/landscape

50-7 death/"top of Mona high"

58-63 revels/death

64-9 despair/death

Second Movement:

70-107 pluck/mantle

108-131 corrupt shepherds

132-153 return/landscape

154-164 death/"bottom of the monstrous world"

165-185 revels/resurrection

186-193 hope/rebirth

See Evans, *The Road from Horton: Looking Backwards in "Lycidas"* (Victoria: English Literature Studies, 1983), pp. 62-3.

¹¹C. A. Patrides, ed., *Milton's "Lycidas": The Tradition and the Poem* (Columbia: Univ. of Missouri Press, 1983), pp. 65-7.

¹²Patrides, pp. 158-9.

¹³John Milton, *Lycidas*, in *John Milton: Complete Shorter Poems*, ed. John Carey (London: Longman, 1971), pp. 232-54, lines 15-24. Subsequent references to *Lycidas* will be from this edition and appear parenthetically in the text.

¹⁴Patrides, p. 168.

¹⁵Stephen Booth, *An Essay on Shakespeare's Sonnets* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1969), pp. 83–4.

¹⁶See, for example, Wayne Shumaker's "Flowerets and Sounding Seas: A Study in the Affective Structure of *Lycidas*" (Patrides, pp. 129–39), or Cleanth Brooks and John Edward Hardy's "Essays in Analysis: *Lycidas*" (Patrides, pp. 140–56).

¹⁷Patrides, p. 228.

¹⁸Booth, *Essay*, pp. 176–7.

¹⁹Joseph Frank, "The Unharmonious Vision: Milton as a Baroque Artist," *CLS* 3, 2 (1966): 95–108, 101.

²⁰William Bowman Piper, "The Invulnerability of Poetic Experience," *SCRev* 4, 1 (Spring 1987): 11–23, 16. Piper is both right and wrong about "the paired trees" in line 42. There is a pair and there are indeed two kinds of trees, but the line presents "willows" paired with "copses"—not "willows" paired with "hazels." The experience of these undeniably simple lines is, moreover, further complicated because "hazel" is a color—like "green."

²¹Patrides, p. 327.

²²*Ibid.*

²³Some modern editors try to disable this effect by placing more emphatic punctuation at the end of line 33; Hughes, for instance, places a semicolon there (ed., *Lycidas*, in *John Milton: Complete Poems and Major Prose* [New York: Odyssey Press, 1957], pp. 116–25). Such editorial interventions deny the flexibility of the verse, its ability to serve double duty regardless of grammatical necessities.

²⁴Piper, pp. 13–4.

²⁵Woodhouse and Bush, p. 686.

²⁶Stephen Booth, ed., *Shakespeare's Sonnets, Edited with Analytic Commentary* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1977), p. 507 n.

²⁷The other instance, on line 87 ("That strain I heard"; emphasis added), does not indicate destructive power. Note, however, that although the noun "strain" in line 87 means "song" or "tune," the contextually inadmissible meaning of the verb "strain" ("to injure through overexertion") nudges the line closer to the ideational substance of the other items indicated by demonstrative "that"s.

²⁸John Carey, ed., *Lycidas*, in *John Milton: Complete Shorter Poems* (London: Longman, 1971), p. 252 n. 160.

²⁹Woodhouse and Bush, p. 720.

³⁰Paul Alpers, "Lycidas and Modern Criticism," *ELH* 49, 2 (Summer 1982): 468–96, 489.

³¹Woodhouse and Bush, pp. 667–8.

³²John Creaser, "Lycidas: The Power of Art," *E&S* 34 (1981): 123–47, 134–5.

³³Patrides, p. 171.

³⁴My thanks go to Thomas L. Berger, Stephen Booth, Leah Marcus, and John Rumrich for their valuable comments on various drafts of this essay.