Short Essay on “Lycidas”

Water Imagery

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November 2nd, 2011
My essay is based on the importance of water in Milton’s *Lycidas* elegiac poem. Alive nature is present in all the poem - flowers and trees - but water descriptions – fountains and rivers - have considerably greater importance. Water both submerges and overwhelms - Milton does not forget that his friend King Edward met his death by drowning in the Irish Sea – and the ceaseless movement of water on the shore suggests the comfort of an eternal return. Both, death and rebirth are represented by the constant movement of water. From water comes life, and water preserves life. Its symbolism is ambivalent: water is linked to both life and death; it is home to the Gods but it is also "the sea" that engulfs humans such as E. King. The death of *Lycidas* is related to the inevitable death of all men, and more concretely to Milton’s death.

Using water as a background, Milton moves from classical pastoral images – the “Sisters of the sacred well”, Orpheus’ death and the myth of Alpheus and Arethuse - to Christian allusions, such as a the reference to the “bark”, St. Peter as the “Pilot of the Galilean lake” and the sinking and rise of Christ. The poet is trying to find out who is immediately responsible of the death of his friend but he cannot find answer to the question, because the aquatic deities deny all responsibility for the death. So there is opposition from cheerful pastoral imagery to the suggestion of man’s helplessness against fate.

The first instance of classical water imagery has its place in line 14:

> “Without the meed of som melodious tear.
> Begin then, *Sisters of the sacred well,*”

According to M. H. Abrahams (1961:217) “the tear is the elegy itself, which derives its inspiration from the *sacred well of the muses*, and flows on through a
profusion of fountains, rivers, and streams in richly ambiguous interrelations of harmonies, contrasts and ironies, until, by the agency of “resurrection images”, all of which has to do with a circumvention of the sea, we are transferred to a transcendent pastoral realm where Lycidas walks other streams along and the saints wipe the tears forever from his eyes”. In the next line the speaker invokes the Sisters of the sacred well. According to C. Brooks and J. E. Hardy (1961:140), “the sisters are the Nine Muses of Greek mythology, but Milton is careful to relate them to the island of Britain, and more intimately still to the scene of the disaster, to the Welsh coast itself”. The relationship between water and the Muses that keep the sacred well is that its holy water may ensure life, health, and abundance. Many thousands of years ago, wells used to take the form of sacred fountains which were claimed to be the “Fountain of Youth” or the “Fountain of Immortality”. In this case both could be related to the death of Lycidas, a young man, and his rise to the Sun, to the Light. On the other hand, frogs often lived in wells and its medicine was related to the energy of water. This could be another interpretation that Milton uses to refer to the energy of water that makes the ship of Edwards sink. Following with classical water images, Milton refers to Orpheus’ death in lines 58-63:

What could the Muse her self that Orpheus bore,
The Muse her self, for her enchanting son
    Whom Universal nature did lament,
When by the rout that made the hideous roar,
    His goary visage down the stream was sent,
Down the swift Hebrus to the Lesbian shore.

The relationship between Orpheus and Lycidas is that both met their death in the water. At a very young age, Orpheus died at the hands of Thracian women, jealous of his love and fidelity towards his wife and hurt by his indifference, they tore his body
to pieces and threw his head into the river “His goary visage down the stream was sent” (l.62), which went floating “Down the swift Hebrus to the Lesbian shore” (l.63). The point here is that even not Orpheus’ mother, the Muse Calliope, could save her son from his fatal and violent death. Milton might see himself as if he were Orpheus, going through the nature singing and lamenting, because he does not want to die. Lycidas also met his death on the water when his ship sank into the Irish sea. I have the image of the strong movement of water taking his body and carrying it to its most deep, such in “Where were ye Nymphs when the remorseless deep Clos'd o're the head of your lov'd Lycidas?” (l.50) referring to the deep of the sea where Lycidas met his death. Water here would represent the death. All the Muses of the classical tradition seemed to be ineffectual, as they could protect neither Orpheus nor the King from the water ferocity. Again the relationship of water and death is very clear, as the latter is presented as the final. The fact that King Edward died by drowning perhaps opened up to Milton a much larger range of death and rebirth imagery, finding the occasion to talk about the desire of immortality with the faith of death. At this point, the myth of Alpheus and Arethuse is used by Milton. In Lycidas, Milton refers to Arethuse in “O Fountain Arethuse, and thou honour'd flood” (l. 85), a fountain in Sicily associated with poetic inspiration and to Alpheus “Return Alpheus, the dread voice is past”. Studying it more deeply, in his “Arcades” Milton refers to Alpheus and Arethuse too:

Divine Alpheus, who by secret sluice,
Stole under Seas to meet his Arethuse;
(Aarcades, [l.30-31])

The allusion to those two divinities has a clear relationship with Lycidas and his encounter with the death in the water. According to the Greek mythology, Arethuse was a hunter. One day she decided to take a swim and she seemed to feel something beneath
her. She tried to escape and making her way to the sea, she found herself consumed by Alpheus as his water mingled with hers. If we analyze this more carefully, we see a connection between Arethuse and Lycidas and Alpheus and water. Lycidas tried to escape from the water, from his death, as well as Arethuse, but this was so powerful that carried him with hers. The imagery also suggests sexual generation; a life force whelming under the tides. Here again the water is a synonym of death, because Lycidas could not escape from hers and meet his death under Seas. The power of the water is tremendous and when she swings her movement seems threatening, as in “And listens to the Herald of the Sea” (l.89), so no one could escape from her strength, neither Arethuse nor Lycidas. All water allusions mentioned above carry great weight within the poem as we see how Milton takes mythology divinities to express the force of water that at the same time is connected with fatality and revival. In addition, there are many other allusions where water is present such in ‘fountain, flood, sea, waves’ on the seventh stanza that remember the reader King’s death in the waters of the Irish Sea. Milton asks him one question: what were the responsible authorities doing to allow such a disaster to befall Lycidas? The poet is trying to find out who was immediately responsible of the death of his friend, but he cannot find answer to the question, because Neptune and other aquatic deities deny all responsibility for the death, and the poet is obliged to place the culpability on ‘the fatal and perfidious bark/ Built in th’eclipse, and rigged with curses dark’ (l.100). This lines move from joyful pastoral imagery to the suggestion of man’s helplessness against fate. Yet again his friend, King Edward, has died with no justification. There is no justice, which in the Christian language means no redemption. The ship in this case is a metaphor for the soul, condemned by original sin to suffer death. D. Daiches (1961:113) argues that “the hero as poet is now enlarged to encompass the hero as Christian champion, and such a loss is deplored both by
Cambridge (represented by the River Cam) and St. Peter, identifiable as “Pilot of the Galilean Lake”. The important thing is not the loss suffered by the death of a young man but the loss to society when the poet dies before he can serve it. Here the statement of St. Peter:

Last came, and last did go,

The Pilot of the Galilean lake.

[...]

But that two-handed engine at the door,
Stands ready to smite once, and smite no more.

[l.109-131]

According to J.V. Ward “The ‘Pilot of The Galilean Lake’ is identifiable as St Peter an account of the keys he carries recalling the New Testament passage ‘and I will give unto thee the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven’ (Mathew 16:19). St Peter was the original pastor taking his authority from Christ ‘The Good Shepherd’ who instructed Peter to ‘feed my sheep’. Milton takes the opportunity to introduce into a pastoral poem, biblical allegories concerning contemptible shepherds. St Peter’s ‘Mitr’d locks’ give him the Episcopal status and authority but his outburst against bishops of the Anglican Church condemns the theological doctrine of apostolic succession by which bishops claim authority. ‘Creep include and climb into the fold’ refers to the gospel passage ‘he that entereth not by the door into the sheepfold, but climbeth up some other way, the same is a thief and a robber’ (John 10/1), undermining the bishops’ authority to act as pastors. ‘Swoln with wind....rot inwardly, and foul contagion spread ‘ brings to mind Christ’s denunciation of the Pharisees who as bad priests are ‘whited sepulchres’ (Matthew 23/27) lavishly dressed on the exterior but inside full of corruption. The ‘grim Woolf” (l.128) a reference to the Catholic Church reminds the reader of the command to
‘beware of false prophets which come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly they are ravening wolves’ (Matthew 7/15). The passage culminates in a reference to a ‘two-handed engine’. This could refer to the two handed sword wielded by St Michael, imprecated later in the poem, or possibly to an individual man acting as the instrument of God’s will. Possibly Milton here refers to himself who volunteers to be the Divine agent”. (source: http://www.english-literature-essays.com/milton.htm). The conclusion of St. Peter suggests that something will be done about those who abuse society’s trust (Cf. C. A. Patrides, 1961). Besides, according to Brooks and Hardy (1961:150), “the poet appeals to the dolphins to “waft the hapless youth” as one of them once in Greek fable carried the body of the drowned Palaemon to the shore. The poet does not ask the angel Michael to lift the body from the sea, his petition goes no further than to ask him to feel pity for Lycidas and his friends “look homeward angel now, and melt with truth”. Dolphins could be a personification of God, Christ.

Looks toward Namancos and Bayona’s hold;

Look homeward Angel now, and melt with ruth.

And, O ye Dolphins, waft the haples youth.

Finally, 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 Christian rise. The rising from low to high, from sea to heaven. He is mounted high in heaven, mounted high through poem itself. This could be a metaphor for the resurrection of Christ. Shepherds weep no more because Lycidas is now guardian of the seas. He will guide them to the shore when sea is forceful compared to the sun. It rises once again brighter than when it set. The water appears as a reflection or an image of the soul rising to the Sun.
To sum up, in Lycidas the reader finds several watery images – The “Sisters of the Sacred Well”, Orpheus, Alpheus and Arethuse, the reference to the “bark”, St. Peter as the “Pilot of the Galilean Lake” and finally the sunk and rise of *Lycidas* - that make allusion to death and rebirth. Milton plays with the ceaseless movement of water on the shore to suggest the comfort of an eternal return.


