

# Semblance and truth in milton's lycidas

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The speaker of Milton's "Lycidas" has been the subject of much debate—debate concerning his identity, his principal topic, and his attitude toward that topic. Thus far, the critical conversation has been uninformed by current linguistic theory, which has the potential to further complicate a poem that many think requires no further complication. Why do it, then? On the one hand, the poem's many inconsistencies are obvious and frequently discussed; on the other, as Victoria Silver asserts in "'Lycidas' and the Grammar of Revelation," we all—even Stanley Fish—resist them, attempting to make sense of and thus erase the incoherence. Basing her claims on reformed theology, Silver argues convincingly that Milton planned the incoherence of "Lycidas," deliberately emphasizing the gap that always exists between semblance and truth, sign and meaning, and that he did so because it is in this gap that God operates. Besides Silver, I know of two others who accept the unreconcilable con-

tradictions of "Lycidas": Elizabeth Hanson, who argues that "the poem denies its own ecstatically proclaimed end to the pain and anxiety which propel it" (70), and Russell Fraser, who reads the poem as a conflict between two poets, in which the "last two lines are only formally conclusive and suggest a different poet, still at odds with his material" (118). With its contradictions firmly grounded in Milton's theology and intuitive psychology of grief, it is not surprising that the poem resists our resistance, our attempts to close the gap.

Linguistic analysis confirms the unreconcilable contradictions and ambiguities of "Lycidas," particularly those of the poem's multiple speakers and subjects. Multiple voices and subjects coexist within the first 185 lines;

as Paul Alpers writes, the speaker of the poem possesses “unusual openness and flexibility” as he “enact[s] . . . the play between monody and dialogue—sometimes taking heard voices into his own and sometimes producing voices attributed to others” (481). In addition to his interplay with other speakers such as Phobus, Chamus, and “the Pilot of the Galilean lake,” the swain himself possesses at least two distinct voices: one commenting, reflecting, on the other. Furthermore, the Pilot’s digression also contains a voice of commentary, which is similar but not identical to the swain’s reflective voice. The last eight lines introduce an impersonal, third-person voice, which differs from all previous voices, and further complicates the poem. As Catherine Belsey queries, “Where now is the (authorized) voice of *Lycidas*?” (33).

Not only is “*Lycidas*” what Walter Schindler calls “a polyphony of voices,” but a polyphony of subjects as well (37; cf. Judge 6). Although the final eight lines demonstrate a single focus on the swain, the first 185 lines concern multiple inter-related topics, including the swain, *Lycidas*, poetry, learning, and spiritual matters. Moreover, while some critics would agree with John Reising that “*Lycidas*, whatever its universal implications may ultimately be, is in the first instance a poem about *Lycidas*,” the majority have taken the subject of the poem as Milton himself, whether they judge this a good or an evil (21). Christopher Hill, for instance, argues that “*Lycidas* is ostensibly a poem about the tragedy of youthful death” but is really a means for Milton “to ask how important worldly success is, and to assess his own life in the light of King’s death” (49- 50). Other proposed subjects of the poem include grief; the community of shepherds and Milton’s “desire for companionship”;

Christ; the church; death and rebirth; forgiveness; baptism; music; youth; homoerotic love transcended by God's eternal love; the tutor as surrogate father; and the poetical succession in which the mantle passes from Lycidas to the "mature consciousness" of the last lines (Bourdette; Davies 83; Frye 121; McLoone 79; Baier; Moore; Lieb; Watterson 50; Martz 547). I would group the possible topics of "Lycidas" into three categories: the speakers, the deceased, and the nonhuman. Many of the last are implied; they transcend the poem's syntax and are thus outside the scope of this discussion.

"Modern criticism has rejected the view that the poem's form is incidental to its meaning; the meaning of Lycidas is thought to reside in its elected form" (Johnson 69). Barbara Johnson thus summarized critical thought of the 1970's to introduce her article on the pastoral and grief, but her words are equally applicable to another aspect of the poem's "elected form": its grammar. Two recent linguistic theories concerning sentence structure affirm that the speaker and subject of "Lycidas" are deliberately multiple. One of these theories has been previously used in a discussion of literature (Tolliver's analysis, using Kuno's empathy theory, of "La novia fiel" by Pardo Bazan); otherwise, both have remained until now in the realms of speech and expository prose.

According to Susumo Kuno, syntax reveals the speaker's attitudes toward others. In *Functional Syntax: Anaphora, Discourse, and Empathy*, Kuno defines "empathy" as "the speaker's identification, which may vary in degree, with a person/thing that participates in the event or state that he

[/she] describes in a sentence,” or as “ a camera angle on x rather than y” (206). Kuno assumes that the sentence in its natural state is egocentric—that is, in the case of “ Lycidas,” that the uncouth Swain will empathize more with himself than with Lycidas. The speaker may still choose to limit the self-empathy; in literature, the writer makes this choice on behalf of the speaker. Language, argues Kuno, contains mechanisms which enable the speaker to limit or disguise self-empathy, mechanisms such as passivization: “ Mistakes were made,” rather than “ I made mistakes.” Similarly, the speaker may alter his or her syntactic bias toward others: consider the difference in empathy between “ John hit Bill” and “ Bill was hit by John.” In the former, any bias is in John’s favor, while the speaker of the latter probably sides with Bill. Another such mechanism is seen where John and Bill are brothers, and the speaker refers to Bill not by name but as “ John’s brother”; this last term “ can be used to refer to Bill only when the speaker has placed himself closer to John than to his brother; the term . . . does not give Bill an independent characterization, but a characterization that is dependent upon John” (204). Kuno’s rule for the latter method of altering empathy is the Descriptor Empathy Hierarchy, while passivization falls under his Surface Structure Empathy Hierarchy (207).

Empathy is further complicated by multiple topics within a single sentence. The “ empathy relationships” within a sentence must be logically compatible, as stated in Kuno’s Ban on Conflicting Empathy Foci; thus “ John’s brother was hit by him” sounds odd because “ John’s brother” declares the primary focus to be John, while the passive voice asserts a bias toward Bill (206-7). On the other hand, a grammatical sentence may contain uninterpretable

empathy relationships. For instance, in “ John and his brother talked to Mary about her sister,” the speaker empathizes with John more than his brother and with Mary more than her sister, but gives no clues about the four other empathy relationships: between John and Mary, John and Mary's sister, John's brother and Mary, John's brother and Mary's sister (207-8). Further, a sentence may contain a hierarchy of empathy relationships, as in “ John talked to his wife about her sister,” where the speaker empathizes most with John and least with John's wife's sister (208). Finally, empathy may differ from sentence to sentence (Kuno's Transitivity of Empathy Relationships rule), so a discourse must be analyzed one sentence at a time (207).

Kuno posits several other grammatical rules governing empathy, including the Syntactic Prominence Principle, which states that the noun representing the person or thing receiving empathy tends to be found in a prominent position in the sentence. For instance, the speaker of the following sentence reveals a primary interest in Susan's presence when he or she makes “ Susan” the left-most noun in the coordinate structure: “ I wonder if Susan and Carol are coming to the meeting this afternoon.” When the speaker includes himself or herself in the coordinate structure, however, the Modesty Principle dictates “ Jill and I just can't agree on the first sentence of our business plan” rather than “ I and Jill.” Kuno argues that the latter version is more natural, while the former is “ artificial,” “ taught repeatedly at the grade school level” (232- 33). Finally, Kuno's rule of Semantic Case Hierarchy states that “ other things being equal, the more agentive or experiencer- like a role an NP [noun phrase] plays vis-a-vis the action/state represented in the sentence, the easier it is for the speaker to empathize

with its referent" (238). According to this rule, the speaker of the sentence "Melissa showed Mary a picture of little William" expresses the most empathy with Melissa, the agent of the action as well as the noun in the most prominent position. Mary receives secondary empathy: she is not ac