

Postoral Elements in Milton's LYCIDAS

Dr. Awadhesh Kumar Mishra

Asst. Prof. of English

Dr. R.M.A.S.College, Malighat, Muzaffarpur (Bihar)

Abstract : 'Lycidas' is an elegy that Milton created in 1637 to lament the death of his friend Edward King. Though lyrical, it is not spontaneous and is often the result of deliberate poetic art and can be as elaborate in style as the ode. We read the elegy as a conscious work of art and not as a spontaneous expression of sorrow. Death, the primary theme of most elegies, is a vast evocative theme. It leads the poet to regions of reflections usually lying beyond the lyric imagination. Death can be, and is often, the starting point for the poet to deal with serious themes.

Milton, for example, gives us in 'Lycidas', speculations on the nature of death, tributes to friends, as also literary criticism. He comments on the degradation of poetry and religion in 'Lycidas'. Though grief is the dominant condition in the early parts of an elegy, many elegies end on a note of joyful resignation and also on a note of affirmation. The pastoral elegy uses the mechanism of pastoral convention shepherds and shepherdesses, incidents form bucolic life and rustic speech.

As far as the structure of the poem is concerned, it could safely be divided into six identifiable sections. The first section serves as a prologue to the poem running through the first twenty four lines. Lines 25-84 constitute the second part of the poem. The third section, lines 85-131, is even more concerned to pastoral style.

The fourth section, lines 132-164, expresses Milton's feelings on Lycidas' death. Lines 165-184, the fifth section presents Milton's belief in immortality. The sixth section, lines 185-193, forms the epilogue of the poem. This section refers to Greek pastoral poets and expresses a determination to make greater poetic achievements while facing life hopefully.

'Lycidas' is a pastoral elegy and is written in the form of other pastorals with its prologue and epilogue and the monody of a shepherd who has lost his friend. Under the guise of one shepherd mourning another, all Milton's relationship with Edward King are expressed, all his thoughts about his character and genius are exposed. This poem is to be judged and read with the conditions of the pastoral as a form of the verse present at that time.

Index Terms - Elegy, Prologue, Epilogue, Pastoral, Mourning

The criticism of 'Lycidas' as an elegy is at bottom the criticism of pastoral conventions. The Renaissance gave a new lease of life to the pastoral tradition, introduced by Theocritus, Bion and Moschus and later on by Virgil. The lament in Spencer's 'Shepherd's Calendar' as well as in 'Astrophel' gave birth to pastoral form in the Elizabethan age which remains strongly alive in elegies. Milton in 'Lycidas' accepted the traditional form of pastoral elegy to commemorate the premature death of Edward King, his friend. Let Dr. Johnson hold the pastoral convention in poetry to be artificial, rigid and overworn, let his hard verdict pin-point that, "passion runs not after remote illusions where there is leisure for fiction, there is little grief", but Milton knows his business quite well. Let Dr. Johnson keep in mind that the use of these artifices is the very habit of the mind of the poet. The pastoral form was a device adopted by the poet for distancing themselves off from the ordinary and mediocre. From 1580 to 1640, much of the finest poetry in the Elizabethan age was written in pastoral form and during that period the 'shepherd' was the synonym for the word 'poet' in England. So, Milton, who is generally considered the last Elizabethan, did nothing wrong in adopting the pastoral form of elegy.

'Lycidas' is a pastoral elegy and is written in the form of other pastorals with its prologue and epilogue and the monody of the shepherd who has lost his friend. Under the guise of one shepherd mourning another, all Milton's relationship with Edward King are expressed, all his thoughts about his character and genius are exposed. This poem is to be judged and read with the conditions of the pastoral as a form of verse present at that time. In 'Lycidas', not only the imagery of the shepherd's life is employed throughout, but certain traditional features recur such as -

- a) Expostulatory address to some higher power starting with - "Begin them, sisters of the sacred well", in the second verse-paragraph.
- b) Lament of Nature for the dead, found in the fourth verse-paragraph - "But O the heavy change, now thou art gone."
- c) Inquest, presented in the seventh verse-paragraph,
- d) Procession of mourners found in the eight verse-paragraph - "Next comus, reverend sire, went footing slow".

Milton, of course, in 'Lycidas' does not aim at sinking himself completely but he aims at extreme elevation and individuality or rather, let us say the Miltonic 'sublime'. The images of unripe barrier and such phrases as 'season due' and 'mellowing year' introduce in this poem a pastoral atmosphere with all the emotional applications of seed time and harvest. But Milton begins the actual elegy in the second verse-paragraph with deliberate awareness of the classical pastoral tradition - "Begin then, Sister of the sacred well....." The echo of Theocritus's first idyll is very much in these lines. The story, disguised as a friendship between the Theoritean shepherds, is really that of a college friendship between two boyish poets, Milton and Edward King. The third verse-paragraph beginning with, "Together both, are the high tenons appeared" gives an account of the joint self dedication as poets. The growth of the poet's soul against the typical background here is the marked feature. In the next section, Lycidas, the poet, is mourned. The pastoral images of growth and maturity here are replaced by the pastoral images of decay and death.

Milton, then, combines in a skillful way the Christian and the classical pastoral tradition and uses the shepherd as a symbol for the combination of priest and poet. The shepherd in Milton's line, besides being a poet, might be courtiers and priests but they could discuss in allegory a wide range of topics such as politics, theology and church administration. Milton's bitter criticism of the affairs of the church is not a diversion but is very much in the pastoral tradition and for it Milton is indebted to Spencer's "Shepherd's Calendar" (5th eclogue). The completely reversal of tone, however, from grief to joy is the final portion of the poem - "Weep no more, woeful shepherd, weep no more", is a feature introduced by Milton and imitated by Shelley in 'Adonais'.

Prof. Cazyamian speaks highly of 'Lycidas' and says that the poem is an 'example of supreme perfection of style, imagery and versification'. Generally, Milton has got two kinds of style : 1) The classical style, 2) Simple style. "Lycidas" is a fine illustration of both kinds of style. The classical style has been reflected in all the verse - stanzas of 'Lycidas'. First we must remember that 'Lycidas' is an elegy based on the classical models of pastoral elegy, set up by Theocritus, Bion and Moschus.

Naturally, classical style is reflected in the classical allusions which have been abundantly used by Milton in his poem and this proves his great scholarship. References have been made in highly elevated classical languages. The inquest is done in a very emotional way beginning with - "where were ye, nymphs" and with poignant classical, reference to the tragedy 'orphans', 'the enchanting son' of the Muse herself. 'Lycidas' abounds in classical imagery as well as Biblical imagery. Towards the end of the poem, Milton alludes the 'nuptial song' at the marriage of Christ, the divine bridegroom, as given in the Revelation section of the Bible. But we must remember that it is not the allusions but the emotions expressed through them which arrests the attention of readers. The expression of emotion does not suffer because of the allusive style.

But there are lines in the poem where Milton even surpasses the Romantic poets. He has got a rich evocative sweep of imagination and with the help of melody and magic of words, he can make things quite appealing. Milton is also good at the use of poetic device like the metaphors, similes and personifications. Alliteration can be noted in the expression like, "sweat star sparely looks" and "Flames in the Forehead". 'Lycidas' is again a fine example of keen and accurate observation of Milton and his power to describe what he observes. When Milton invites numerous flowers to decorate the coffin of Lycidas, we have a rich colourful feast of the beauties of Nature. Milton beautifully describes the "..... Primrose that forsaken dies the pansy freak'd with jet". The dropping cowslips have been described as flowers having their heads in pensive moods. The verse of 'Lycidas' owes much to Milton's study of Italian poetry. Though he does not example the Canzone, yet his handling of the verse-paragraphs and of varying line lengths clearly derives from the Canzone. Milton has got such a command over the use of language invariable that he can use rhythms variously and flexibly interlaced and occasionally unrhymed line with the fine pattern of music. Milton further has a great mastery over the use of sonorous proper names as found in the line "looks towards Namancos and Bayona's hold". The result is, to quote Prof. Cazamian, "a marvel of liquid blended harmony, whence monotony has been expelled".

T.S.Eliot says, "Poetry is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality" but Milton always proved that poetry can be an expression of personality and a transformation of it. Eliot elsewhere has written that Massinger is a lesser artist because his personality, hardly exists. He did not, out of his own personality, build a world of art as Shakespeare and Marlowe built. Yes, Milton has built a great work of art of his own personality in 'Lycidas'. That 'Lycidas' is at bottom a personal poem of Milton, is abundantly expressed in the poem itself. At the outset, however, Milton talks about his immaturity of poetic genius. He believes that he has hardly achieved a workable

perfection in poetic creation. All the same, he risks apprenticeship in poetry only because the situation has made a pressing demand on him. He apologises :

"And with forced fingers rude shatter your leaves before the mellowing year".

Clearly, Milton thinks that he is unable to handle the delicate tool of poesy. His fingers lack in delicacy, softness and poise. He has plucked the berries harsh and crude. The subtle and mature art of poetry writing is beyond his reach, as yet..... that is his feeling.

In this poem Milton willy-nilly talks about his own death or the possibility of it even before his mature poetic attainments, for, King and he both were young and imaginative with identical high aims of poetic pursuit.

"..... for we were nursed upon the self-same hill."

But fate is fickle and man is a play thing in its hand. Now, if King can be snatched away in beauty's bloom, Milton has reasons to doubt his fairly long career. Naturally, he is constrained to talk about his own death. His aims and ideals seem to be frustrated in the teeth of impending death. But somehow he gets consolation in high spiritual values. If so happens, at least, Jove will judge the merit of the poet aright and assign to him his due recognition.

What is remarkable in 'Lycidas' is the description of St. Peter's participation in the funeral ceremony. This is due to the fact that the clergy of his time has become thoroughly corrupt : "How well could I have spared for thee, young swain"

Here, too, Milton refers to his own ceaseless war against the corrupt clergy. The Puritan in Milton could hardly swallow the bitter pills of corruption and degradation of the Church machinery. All the time, Milton lived a steadfast and upright life, hence he failed to stomach the indecencies of the clergy, which proved a stumbling block in the path of his realization of high poetic and spiritual ideals. Infact, Puritanism and idealism are the very twins. Some critics further say that the famous concluding line of the poem, "To-morrow to fresh woods, and pastures new." has an autobiographical ring about it since this line is firm with his determination to fulfill his own promise of becoming an epic poet. Infact, Milton after finishing 'Lycidas', went on his Italian tour to search out his materials of his proposed epic poetry.

Milton, the solitary epic poet of England, is always serious-minded. Gravity is the very tenor of Miltonic verse. 'Lycidas', his great elegy is not an exception to it. It was first published in the Memorial volume in 1638. The poems, contributed to this volume by Henry King, Cleveland, Beaumont and others were uninspired and absolutely conventional. They were devoid of inspiration and gravity. Among such poems 'Lycidas' stands out for its gravity of utterance and formal pastoral convention. The death of Edward King touched Milton's heart not because he was intimate with him but because he apprehended that he also might set off and his ambition of becoming a great epic poet might remain unfulfilled. This apprehension of premature death lends the poem a gravity of utterances. Infact, the subject matter of the poem is not simply Edward King, nor is it simply Milton himself. The subject matter of the poem is the man in his creative power whose life may be cut short by death before he makes any positive contribution. Hence the lament, hence the serious problem, hence the frequency of grave thoughts. The theme of 'Lycidas' is the fate of the poet-priest in all its aspects, both as individual and social figure. Hence, gravity is there in all the utterances of the poet.

The chief beauty of 'Lycidas' consists in tune with the classical pastoral elegy. But the conventional pastoral images here are not decorative but functional. Milton was inspired by the pastoral convention, introduced by Theocritus, Virgil and Bion. The first verse-stanza of 'Lycidas' is introductory where Milton gives an account of King's death and an explanation of writing an immature elegy. In the manner of the classical poets, Milton invokes the Muses - "Begin them, sisters of the sacred well", 'Lycidas' is steeped in pastoral images which are at once personal and functional Like Theocritus and Virgil, Milton also here presents Nature, dressed in the deepest mourning. The address to the nymph, blaming them for their negligence, is reminiscent of Virgil.

Thus, 'Lycidas' represents Milton's perfection of the pastoral mode - the characteristic mode of his earlier poetry. The pastoral elegy, infact, was ceasing to be a centrally fashionable form when Milton wrote 'Lycidas'. Neither "Shepherd's Calendar" of Spenser nor the pastoral poetry of the Elizabethan lyricist including Marlowe's "Come live with me and be my love" nor the strong pastoral elements in Shakespeare's "As you like it" and "The Winter's Tale" could infuse the life-saving spirit into the dying pastoral form. Yet 'Lycidas' set firmly in a dying pastoral form and Milton has put inside it so many things which would have been ill-fitted. Had Milton's art in his poetry not so fine and

over mastering, the very unfitness would not have become a kind of fascination - 'Lycidas' is an essence, the crown of Milton's whole tradition. Prof. Brett is perfectly right when he suggests the last line of 'Lycidas' -

"Tomorrow to fresh wood and Pastures new" is a farewell to the whole European pastoral mode with its ambiguous mythologies.

REFERENCES :

- [1] Womack, Mark : "On the value of Lycidas", studies in English literature, 1997.
- [2] Brown, Eric C : "Ovid's Rivers and the Naming of Milton's Lycidas", Early Modern Literary Studies, 2001.
- [3] Fraser, Russell : "Milton's Two Poets, Voices in John Milton's 'Lycidas'", studies in English Literature, 1994.
- [4] Horton Alison : "An Exploration into the Etymology of Lycidas", Milton Quarterly, 1998.
- [5] Kaminsky, Thomas : "Striving with Vergil : The Genesis of Milton's Blind Mouths" - Modern Philology, 1995.
- [6] Hanford, James Holly : "The Pastoral Elegy and Milton's Lycidas", 1910.
- [7] DeBeer, E.S. : "St. Peter in Lycidas", The Review of English studies - 1947.
- [8] Alpers, Paul : "Lycidas and Modern Criticism" - 1982.

