

Towards An Ecocritical Approach of John Milton's *Lycidas*

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This paper examines John Milton's famous pastoral poem, *Lycidas*, which was published in 1637. There are two basic questions posed in the present examination. First, I would like to explore the ways in which the poem is related to the pastoral tradition, calling attention to certain tensions permeating the tradition. Then I would like to figure out whether it is possible to read the text in the framework of ecocriticism, a critical school having been emerging from the 1990s, promising new ways of investigating the relationship between literary works and the physical world surrounding us. Since pastoral is an important area of study for ecocriticism, the juxtaposition will hopefully turn out to be a productive one.

I. Introduction

There is a long tradition of commemorating a fellow poet in English literature. Among others, Edmund Spenser (*Astrophel*, 1595), John Milton (*Lycidas*, 1637), John Dryden (*To the Memory of Mr Oldham*, 1684), Percy Bysshe Shelley (*Adonais*, 1821), and Alfred Tennyson (*In Memoriam A. H. H.*, 1850) had once expressed a poetic farewell to a poet departing from life. This illustrious list and the similarity of the topic alone urges a common assessment of the poems, however, the present paper only undertakes the examination of John Milton's *Lycidas*. Why should one read this poem at the beginning of the 21st century? A part of the answer, surprisingly, lies in the epigraph of a medical paper with the intriguing title *Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy and Variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob*

Disease: Background, Evolution, and Current Concerns (Brown et al. 2001). In 2004, there were library miseries in my city, so I had to rely more on the internet, and the above title was put on the screen by one of the popular search engines as a result for the query concerning John Milton's *Lycidas*. The link between Milton's poem and the paper on the mad cow disease is nothing more than that in the epigraph of the paper, the author quotes the following lines from *Lycidas*:

The hungry Sheep look up, and are not fed,
But swoln with wind, and the rank mist they draw
Rot inwardly, and foul contagion spread...

I immediately started to think about the question: how can a medical paper published in 2001 use Milton's text for any purpose? What is the basis of the dialogue between a 17th century poem and a 21st century medical paper? The answer, as someone more involved in the literature part of the problem I finally decided, must be encoded in the poem and the purpose of this paper is to decode that answer.

Opposed to a previous version of my paper (where I touched upon the following themes: pastoral mode, Biblical theme, the tradition of funeral poetry, apocalypticism) I decided to single out the pastoral mode as the focus of investigation, because I think that the real value of *Lycidas* lies in the revolutionary way the pastoral mode is reinterpreted by it. As I will argue for it later, this pastoral-centred approach necessarily leads to an ecocritical re-evaluation of the poem. Consequently, my main questions are the following. How does Milton use the pastoral mode? How can the poem be read in the context of twenty-first century, particularly in an ecocritical framework of discussion?

As for the methodology applied, I will offer two parallel readings of the poems. First, I will pay attention to the way the pastoral mode is represented by the text. As a reference, I will use secondary sources about English pastoral. Then I will perform a reading that is probably more focused on the present-day reader, and my aim through this is to discover how the present context (especially the environmental crisis) influences the reading of the text.

II. Pastoral

From the perspective of the present paper, it is quite problematic that by today modern secondary literature on pastoral has become so abundant

and complex that there is no hope at all to provide an overview of or at least a more detailed glimpse at it. Therefore, I decided to select two recent comprehensive monographs on pastoral to develop my thesis. While choosing the two monographs, my basic effort was to select two works completely different in nature. The first one is of a more encyclopaedic character: Elze Kegel-Brinkgreve's book offers an overview of the international development of the genre from Theocritus to Wordsworth, especially focusing on the peak of English Pastoral, that is from Spenser to Marvell (Brinkgreve 1990). This is a kind of – more or less – chronological review of primary and secondary sources, underpinned with a significant number of quotations. On the other hand, Terry Gifford's *Pastoral* is a great deal different (Gifford 1999). The book is more theoretical (especially the first chapter), and the theoretical considerations discussed in the book, the concept of anti-pastoral and postpastoral proved to be very thought-provoking for me, not to mention the link between pastoral and ecocriticism, which directed my attention towards a completely new approach.

As a first step towards understanding the nature of pastoral, it is important to clarify the more general category of what we term as 'pastoral.' There are pastoral poems, pastor dramas, pastoral novels, and so on. So it is definitely wrong to think of pastoral as a genre, as it is rather a way of expression, a tone of voice, a system of conventions universally accessible in virtually every genre. The universality of pastoral can be traced in Puttenham's statement: "Some be of opinion ... that the pastoral Poesie ... should be the first of any other, and before the *Satyre, Comedie* or *Tragedie*" (Loughrey 1984, 34). The proper term, according to Brinkgreve is 'mode', and during my paper, I will also use this, although I am not fully convinced of its validity in all circumstances.

Brinkgreve reviews a number of definition-attempts in her book, and stresses the problems of definition (where no reference is provided, the source is Brinkgreve 1990, 377-379). The following lines are especially important:

According to M. Gerhardt pastoral is essentially anti-realistic, an autonomous literary fiction, in which imitation is a major formative stimulus. This thesis represents a great advance when compared to the notion (...) that pastoral is an insipid and artificial convention (Brinkgreve 1990, 377).

Although she does not agree fully with Gerhardt's definition (she especially questions the anti-realism of pastoral), it is important to highlight the autonomy and the imitative nature of pastoral, and we also have to keep in mind the problem of artificial conventionality. The next point is connected to the name of Sir Walter Wilson Greg, who claims that the prime mover of the

genre is the "town-dweller's nostalgia for the supposedly peaceful existence of the shepherd in his idyllic environment," but Brinkgreve finds this a simplified view lacking the important element of masquerade.

Brinkgreve also presents a methodological consideration among the presentation of different definitions: "When a scholar discusses 'pastoral', his idea of the genre may well derive from some presuppositions and a reading experience which tends to colour his general conclusions." I think this is very important in understanding how pastoral works, maybe even more important than to give an exact definition of the mode. Moving towards a conclusion about the definitions, Brinkgreve introduces a strange conditional method (worked out by D.M. Halperin) as the most acceptable, which is based on four criteria (Brinkgreve 1990, 379). This definition, resembling the flow chart of a computer program, seems to be more or less accepted by Brinkgreve, yet she is again asking for the masquerade aspect of the pastoral tradition, which is absent from Halperin's definition-system. She also notices the problem of development and the changing nature of the tradition, and thus the question comprising the chapter title (*What is pastoral?*) is eventually left unanswered.

Terry Gifford's book defines three different meanings for pastoral. In the first sense, "pastoral is a historical form with a long tradition" (Gifford 1999, 1). The basic requirement in a pastoral work of art, in this sense, is the presence of shepherds. The second sense reveals a broader use of the term: "In this sense pastoral refers to any literature that describes the country with an implicit or explicit contrast to the urban" (Gifford 1999, 2). The first two definitions are quite traditional, however, the third usage of the term is something new, and it can be summed up by Gifford's example:

A Greenpeace supporter might use the term as a criticism of the tree poem if it ignored the presence of pollution or the threat to urban trees from city developers. Here the difference between the literary representation of nature and the material reality would be judged to be intolerable by the criteria of ecological concern (Gifford 1999, 2).

The novelty of Gifford's book is the linking of the genre to a relatively new critical approach, ecocriticism: "literary ecocriticism ... has also led to the rereading, through modern ecological perspectives, of earlier literature, such as the pastoral, that engaged with our relationship with the natural environment" (Gifford 1999, 5). We also have to mention Gifford's notion of the "fundamental pastoral movement", which is retreat or return, the latter also meaning the return of something to the audience. This, in case of a pastoral elegy, is especially important, but on a more general level, its importance lies in the obvious reference to Golden Age.

A certain "pastoral anomaly" is often experienced when reading pastoral poems, which could be illustrated by the opposition of two earlier opinions on the mode. The first is the 15th century Cristoforo Landino, who praises Virgil's eclogues in the following fashion:

He conceals under that commonplace meaning another one which is far more excellent; so that the work is enriched with a double argument, which is geared to the surface meaning and also brings out the hidden sense (Landino quoted by Brinkgreve 1990, 369).

Now if we contrast this with Samuel Johnson's famous criticism of *Lycidas*, it becomes even more interesting. Condemning Milton's use of the pastoral mode, Johnson writes:

We know that they never drove a field, and that they had no flocks to batten; and though it be allowed that the representation may be allegorical, the true meaning is so uncertain and remote, that it is never sought, because it cannot be known when it is found (quoted in Loughrey 1984, 71).

It seems that although Johnson is aware of the allegorical nature of pastoral, he does not get the point of the "double argument". If we, following Brinkgreve, accept that pastoral is in a sense masquerade, then we get to the centre of the pastoral anomaly: there is continuous performance, the shepherds are on a virtual (or real) stage, but because of the double argument, in order to understand the poems, we have to identify the director's feelings and attitudes, and definitely not those of the actors and the acted characters. So if someone takes the "first argument" at face value, he or she will not be able to conceive the second argument. Doctor Johnson, in my opinion, misunderstood the poem, when he expressed the above objection, which shows how sensitive an approach, what open-minded attitude is needed to discover the elements beyond the surface of a pastoral poem.

Because of the problems already flagged, there is no hope of offering an incontestable definition of pastoral. The only thing I can offer is *my* pastoral approach, to be applied when reading the poem in the next chapter. Therefore, my working definition could be described in this fashion: an autonomous, (not always) anti-realistic, imitative literary fiction – conventional in nature, driven by nostalgia, operating with oppositions – which contrasts imperfect reality and its harmonious artistic representation in a carvinalesque manner.

III. *Lycidas* – first attempt

In my first attempt at reading Milton's poem, I examine how the poem handles the pastoral mode. My starting point is the separate subsection in Brinkgreve's book on *Lycidas*, in which she places Milton's poem in the pastoral tradition and provides a reading of the poem focusing on its relation to the predecessors (Brinkgreve 1999, 521-530). However, I cannot fully agree with her basic attitude: she deals with the pastoral elements of the text in detail, but, although she identifies the non-pastoral qualities of the poem, she almost completely neglects them. This neglect of the poem's non-pastoral values is also questioned by George Parfitt's study on 17th century funeral poetry: "accounts ignore the extent to which *Lycidas* belongs very clearly to the tradition of funeral poetry in its century" (Parfitt 1992, 114). Of course, above all, *Lycidas* is a pastoral poem. Nonetheless, I think that there are certain aspects of *Lycidas* that give the poem some kind of novelty as opposed to the famous predecessors like Spenser and Sidney. Through skilful use of rather non-conventional devices, Milton creates a kind of "distancing" effect. The poem does not let the reader get attracted by the simplicity of pastoral, Milton forces the reader to seek for the "double argument" mentioned above. The process of a comfortable return or retreat (which, according to Gifford, is one of the most important facets of pastoral, see the chapter entitled '*The Discourse of Retreat*') is denied (Gifford 1999, 45-80). One of the most interesting questions is why Milton did this. But before answering that, first we should be able to see *how* he did it.

From this perspective the epigraph attached to the poem is more than problematic. Considering the fact that the poem was published in a collection of poems commemorating Edward King, I think it is completely pointless to repeat the objective here. It was obvious that the poem would be about King, and because of the context, everyone could identify the dead shepherd with Edward King. On the other hand, the last part of the epigraph is something unusual in a pastoral text. If we accept Gifford's statement that "(...) pastoral is a discourse, a way of using language that constructs a different kind of world from that of realism (Gifford 1999, 45)", then it is quite hard to get along with the problem that Milton proposes the criticism of a "real" institution (the church) in the epigraph. Beside the pre-text, elements of realism are also present in some of the place names to be found in *Lycidas*, summed up in the following chart:

Mona (l. 54)	The Island of Anglesey (in the Irish Sea).
Deva (l. 55)	River Dee.
Mincius (l. 86)	River running through Mantua.
Camus (l. 103)	River Cam, flowing through Cambridge.
Hebrides (l. 92)	Islands off the Scottish coast.

In understanding of the poem, it is a key point to discover the function of this realism, but I will try to provide an answer only after the examination of other important parts of the poem.

Already the opening of the poem delivers some perplexity. Nature is represented here, but the poetic self must “pluck” the three traditional branches (laurel, myrtle, ivy) of the poetic crown, as described in lines 1-5. The cause of this is the death of Lycidas, who also died prematurely. So the first moment in the poem involves some kind of attack against nature, and this makes the reader uneasy. We expect nature and harmony, but get some dissonant feeling instead; the usual peace of nature seems to be disturbed. Brinkgreve also claims that the manner these branches are addressed here is quite unusual (Brinkgreve 1990, 522).

The next part is the calling of the Muses. Brinkgreve suggests that the following lines express the speaker’s hope that “a later poet in his turn will pay comparable homage to the speaker’s own grave”:

So may some gentle Muse
With lucky words favour my destined urn (l. 16-17)

However, the previous line, in my opinion, significantly changes the meaning of these lines: “Hence with denial vain, and coy excuse” (l. 15). Anxiety seems to pervade this line, and the dominant feeling of the poetic self here is not necessarily the grief for the dead friend, but his own realising of unavoidable death. So the problem is: who is this poem about? Is the poet commemorating Lycidas, as suggested by the title, or is he dealing with his own problems? I think here the pastoral framework is left for a while and traces of a more subjective lyric poem appear. Several studies address this question regarding the poem’s impersonality/personality. Northop Frye leads back the general accusation of the poem with being artificial and without real feeling to Samuel Johnson, stating that “Johnson knew better, but he happened to feel perverse about this particular poem, and so deliberately raised false issues” (Frye in Loughrey 1984, 210). He adds that the basic problem is the confusion between personal sincerity and literary sincerity, and also states that “personal sincerity has no place in literature, because personal sincerity as such is inarticulate”

(Frye in Loughrey 1984, 210). At the same time he claims that from a literary perspective, the poem *is* passionately sincere, as Milton was deeply interested in funeral elegies. Frye concludes that to ask for *personal* sincerity in a *literary* work is a fallacy.

Writing about Lycidas, J. Martin Evans differentiates two kinds of reactions to the issues raised by Johnson. One kind of reaction (represented by Tillyard), states that the nominal and the real subject of the poem should be differentiated: “King is but the excuse for one of Milton’s most personal poems” (Tillyard quoted by Evans 1989, 40). The other line of defence is centred on the thought that grief can hardly be translated into words, and “traditional forms such as the pastoral elegy ... provide us with a way of giving shape and order to what otherwise might have been chaotic, fragmented, and unspoken” (Evans 1989, 41). According to this logic, “As such [an occasional poem], it is public, ceremonial, formal rather than private, personal and spontaneous” (Evans 1989, 41). Evans finds neither of these ideas satisfying, and after a detailed comparison of Milton’s poem and Virgil’s tenth eclogue, he arrives to the conclusion that the poem is about the problem of “the fugitive and cloistered virtue” as exemplified by Edward King (Evans 1989, 43), a returning idea of Milton, if we consider the concept of blank virtue in *Areopagitica*.

I think all these opinions are right in one sense or another. The solely literature-centred approach mentioned by Frye seems to me only partially acceptable: it may well be true in case of the writer of the text, but as for the reader, the scope must be widened. If there is intermingling between a text from the world of humanity and a text from the world of science (remember the medical scientist quoting Milton), then we must accept that a reader “takes” many presuppositions into his or her reading, and these presuppositions are not limited to reading experiences. As for Evans’s thoughts, I think that his arguments are quite convincing, and I accept his conclusion. Only as one possible conclusion, though. As later on I will try to show, the power of Milton’s text lies in the fact that through a skilful use of pastoral, his poem offers an almost infinite number of interpretations.

The next section of the poem deals with the common memories of *two* shepherds. The actions described here were committed together, and no individual deed of Lycidas appears in the list. Again, the poetic self cannot suspend itself, the perspective offered is fundamentally subjective, which is not quite typical of pastoral texts. However, the next section has more to do with conventionality: Nature’s mourning is described with typical pastoral phraseology. Another conventional section is the poetic question towards the Nymphs: “Where were ye Nymphs when the remorseless deep / clos’d o’re the head of your lov’d Lycidas?” (l. 50-51). Brinkgreve comments on this in the following way: “The eternal reproach of the pastoral elegy is voiced (...)

but it is given a new turn" and she quotes the following lines of the poem: "Ay me, I fondly dream! / Had ye been there ... for what could that have done?" (l. 56-57). In my opinion, this is another problem, a problem that appears even more explicitly in lines 64-65: "Alas! What boots it with uncessant care / to tend the homely slighted shepherd's trade." Here the poetic self questions the authority of poetry, but since this is a pastoral poem and since Milton wrote only one pastoral poem later, I think it is quite possible to feel some extent of anti-pastorality among these lines. Of course, I do not want to make Milton a proto-hero of environmental protection, the criticism here is not against pastoral's idealised depiction of Nature, but against the unreliable mode itself. It is generally acknowledged that Edward King was "no more than a distant acquaintance of Milton" (Brinkgreve 1990, 529), and the fact that the poetic self in *Lycidas* questions the meaning of poetry is, I think, caused by the poetic self's realisation of the misleading nature of pastoral. Edward King is only a distant acquaintance, but if one "pastoralises" the fact carefully, then he can make a martyr, or at least a great poet from him. If we accept Gifford's statement that pastoral is a discourse, then Milton seems to call attention to the fact that it is a discourse of deception. This is a consequence of the pastoral's "masquerade" (Brinkgreve) or "carvinalesque" (Gifford) nature, and it seems to me that Milton had already realised this problem.

Another problematic point of the poem is the address to the Muses of pastoral in ll. 85-87. The locus may be referring to the question of decorum, which, according to Brinkgreve, was a vulnerable point of bucolic poetry (Brinkgreve 1990, 368-371). The use of delicate language in pastoral poetry had to be defended by such statements like "noble persons are staying in the country" (Scaliger quoted by Brinkgreve 1990, 371). Before these lines, the poetic self (and not *Lycidas*!) was addressed by Phoebus, god of poetry, and the muses of Theocritan (Mincius) and Virgilian (Arethuse) pastoral seem to have been muted till the time the divine figure spoke. Another example of the same problem is found in lines 133-134: "Return Alpheus, the dread voice is past, / That shrunk thy streams; Return Sicilian Muse." Again the two Muses seem to have been "sent away" till St. Peter delivered his speech against the corrupted clergy. In these cases, the pastoral framework is explicitly left behind. If we accept that pastoral is a masquerade, then here the poem offers a view behind the scenes.

For the present examination, one more important part is left in the poem, and that is the ending. Here a completely new framework is revealed. We see the narrator of the previous two hundred lines from a weird, surprising external point of view. This, I think, can easily be interpreted as the closing of an era and the beginning of a new one, although Brinkgreve tries to deny this. She argues that Milton wrote pastoral after *Lycidas*, however, we should

remember that there is only one pastoral poem of Milton after Lycidas. With this one exception, he never returned to the mode, and this can explain a lot of problematic points of the poem. This ending, the sending away of the Muses two times, the imperfect pastorality of the poem can lead us to the conclusion that in this poem, Milton is exploring the boundaries of the pastoral mode. And returning now to the epigraph, we must take a look at the meaning of the 'monody' term. As Evans states: "The term derives ... from Greek tragedy, where it means an ode sung by a single character" (Evans 1989, 50). The fact that the pretext promises a solo kind of song, but the ending of the poem introduces another soloist (not to talk about the problem of the narrator or narrators in the main text of the poem), making anything but a solo from the poem, is a significantly ironic device from Milton, in my opinion again referring to the deceptive potential of pastoral.

As a conclusion about the poem's use of pastoral, I think that Milton's poem proved to be an "unclear" pastoral poem. There are anti-pastoral tendencies in it, but it does not explicitly deny the legitimacy of the genre. With the shifting of the Muses, with the imitation of Virgil, with the questioning of the meaning of (pastoral) poetry, but especially with the last eight lines offering an outward perspective to the whole poem, Lycidas, is – I think – a meta-pastoral work of art. It is continuously exploring the limits of the mode, and always seems to reflect on itself, and through itself on the whole of pastoral poetry. The pretext and the last eight lines offer a framework for the poem, however, as both are in a sense outside the poem (the pretext links the poem to external entities – Church, the last lines feature the poet of the poem), they are further strengthening the poem's self-descriptive nature. Thus Milton leaves his poem open, and that may be why it is always possible to find newer and newer interpretations, which differ in accordance with the way the reader chooses to close the poem, or to explain the openness of it.

IV. *Lycidas* – second attempt

In fact, the second attempt at reading the poem will be an experiment with a critical approach that has been emerging since the 1990s, namely ecocriticism. First, I will briefly introduce this critical school, and then I will search for arguments supporting the use of this approach in connection with Milton's text. The in progress nature of ecocriticism is often emphasised by writers, for example, in this way by Lawrence Buell:

Right now, as I see it, environmental criticism is in the tense but enviable position of being a wide-open movement still sorting out its premises and its powers (Buell 2005, 28).

Nevertheless, there are exact definitions, for example, the New Critical Idiom volume on ecocriticism offers an explanation following Cheryll Glotfelty, a pioneer of the ecocritical movement:

What then *is* ecocriticism? Simply put, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment (Glotfelty quoted by Garrard 2005, 3.)

The only problem is that there are many other possible definitions. A bunch of these is accessible on the webpage of the ASLE (The Association for the Study of Literature and Environment), an American association which, according to Garrard, dominates ecocriticism today (Garrard 2005, 4). This time I do not undertake the task of summarising these position papers, but the yet-emerging nature of the concept must be kept in mind.

It is important to note that behind the whole movement there is the presupposed state of environmental crisis. Most ecocritics (at least the writers of the mentioned position papers) seem to take this for granted, but Garrard is careful concerning the matter, saying that "We will have reason to question the monolithic conception of 'environmental crisis' implied here [in another definition of ecocriticism] ..." (Garrard 2005, 4).

Here I have to make it clear that as a reader of *Lycidas*, it is not at all in my mind to try and decide this question. I think that it is almost irrelevant from the present perspective, whether there is or there is not such thing as environmental crisis. What is important is that there is a discussion going about this, appearing everywhere. So I think that for the present-day reader the discourse about environmental crisis is an inevitable cultural context, surrounding him or her from all directions (books, movies, media). In a sense, a similar effect may be in the background of the quotation by the mentioned medical scientist. He, as a researcher on mad cow disease, is probably surrounded by papers, facts, books etc. on the mad cow disease. This is an inevitable context for him, therefore when he gets to read *Lycidas*, he does it from this context, which drives him to read bovine spongiform encephalopathy into the poem, although it was not necessarily on Milton's mind. My supposition is that when we read Milton's poem today, we are doing it from a context that is overloaded with the elements of a discourse about environmental crisis. As Lawrence Buell writes in his book (which seems more questioning in nature than Garrard's book): "... during the last

third of the twentieth century 'the environment' became front-page news" (Buell 2005, 4).

At this point, when I am searching for arguments supporting an ecocritical consideration of *Lycidas*, it seems promising to take a look at the methodology applied in Garrard's book. In the first chapter (*Beginning: Pollution*) he introduces his method: "I will be reading culture as rhetoric, although not in the strict sense understood by rhetoricians, but as the production, reproduction and transformation of large-scale metaphors" (Garrard 2005, 7), under which he understands the following: pollution, pastoral, wilderness, apocalypse, dwelling, animals, Earth.

It is easy to see that at least two of the metaphors examined by Garrard are present in *Lycidas* as well: the pastoral and the apocalyptic. This suggests that there should be space for an ecocritical evaluation of the poem. But there are other grounds for such an evaluation, too. One of the early key texts of ecocriticism is Carolyn Merchant's *The Death of Nature* (Merchant 1980). This book is based on the idea that the root of environmental crisis is the shift from an organic to a mechanistic view of nature, the cause of which was the Scientific Revolution. Now, thinking of Milton, it is obvious that he lived in the middle of this change, being a contemporary of Samuel Hartlib, an emblematic figure of the Scientific Revolution (as it is clear from Milton's tract *On Education*, recommended to Hartlib). And this is the first point, where we can use an ecocritical approach.

Evans writes in connection with the last eight lines that "The course of Milton's life ... is about to undergo a drastic change" (Evans 1989, 52). Of course, this is related to Milton's life, but looking at a more general scale, we may regard it as a sign of the general change mentioned by Merchant. The change from the organic to a mechanistic view of nature also appears on the level of words. As an opposition to the many words in connection with nature (laurels, season, wind, rose etc.) there is a very harsh contrast in line 131-132: "But that two-handed engine at the door / Stands ready to smite once, and smite no more." The word 'engine' is clearly linked to the mechanistic view of Nature, especially if we note that according to the Oxford English Dictionary (entry *engine*, meaning 7.a.), the usage of the word in the sense of machine dates exactly to the mid-17th century.

The consideration of this shift in world-view sheds new light on the use of pastoral, too. Merchant writes about the pastoral: "The pastoral had been an antidote to the ills of urbanization in ancient times, and it continued to play that role in the commercial revolution" (Merchant 1980, 20). If we juxtapose the supposition that the poem includes a criticism of pastoral questioning the authority of poetry and Carolyn's concept of the shift from organic to mechanic, then the poem may be read as a failing antidote, one which is not

capable of offering a shelter from a reality that is changing in a less desirable way.

Switching back to the metaphors examined by Garrard, his chapter on pastoral strongly relies on Gifford, and says nothing about *Lycidas*, therefore it cannot be used in the ecocritical evaluation of the poem above the extent of the preceding paragraph based on Carolyn's pastoral definition. As for the apocalyptic tradition, I took a more detailed view at it in a previous version of this paper. The idea was mainly based on a reading of the poem focused on the following lines (l. 173-174): "So Lycidas sunk low, but mounted high, / Through the dear might of Him that walked the waves." Through an examination of the apocalyptic tradition, I read the poem as a promise for the coming of the Millennium, where everyone following the example of Lycidas (of course, not in drowning, but in leading an ethical life) will receive the harmony of heaven. Now, the notion of apocalypse is not so different in the ecocritical discourse. As Garrard writes, "Yet arguably very similar [to the apocalyptic rhetoric of people ranging from Judaeo-Christian believers to Muslim Mahdists] rhetorical strategies have provided the green movement with some of its most striking successes" (Garrard 2005, 85). Unfortunately, I do not feel that the hidden apocalyptic tendencies in *Lycidas* can be directly put in the discourse of environmental apocalypse. But there is some, if more indirect, connection. The time of the writing of *Lycidas*, right before the English Revolution, witnessed a serious religious crisis. With the coming of the Civil War, this was complemented by a political crisis. A crisis necessarily leads to the use of apocalyptic rhetoric. So if today we are using green apocalyptic rhetoric, it implies that there is a crisis today. In Milton's time the apocalyptic rhetoric could not stop the crisis, the Civil War broke out. But right before that time, no one knew that war would be the consequence. Now the question is: what if the green apocalyptic rhetoric proves to be ineffective in solving the implied crisis?

Besides, in an ecocritical evaluation it is quite obvious to examine the way nature is represented in the poem. Pastoral texts seem at first sight quite straightforward from this aspect, the rural/nature – urban/civilised opposition being one of their basic components. However, we must not forget about the conventionality and the (sometimes) anti-realistic tendency of the mode. In *Lycidas*, there are important questions raised in this regard.

The first part (from line 1 to line 49) delivers the conventional pastoral depiction of nature, offering a harmonious setting as the background for the retrospective about the happy times when Lycidas was still alive. On the other hand, the beginning of the poem (the "fingers rude" that shatter the leaves) cannot be fitted into this picture. Thus, harmony is brutally disturbed (this word itself can be found in l. 7). In Frye's study, there is a list of the frameworks

of ideas that can be found in *Lycidas*. He differentiates 4 such frameworks: order of Christianity, order of human nature, order of physical nature and the disorder of the unnatural ("the sin and death and corruption that entered the world with the fall" (Frye 1984, 208)). If we accept this categorisation, we can say that the first lines pre-project the fourth type, whereas the retrospective part reveals the second and the third framework (human/physical nature), and the second half of the poem reveals the Christian order (from l. 50 to the resolution by Christ).

In connection with the organic order Merchant claims in an ecofeminist strain that "Central to the organic theory was the identification of nature, especially the earth, with a nurturing mother: a kindly beneficent female who provided for the needs of mankind in an ordered, planned universe" (Merchant 1980, 2). I think that it is obvious that this ideology stands behind the retrospective passage's handling of nature. On the other hand, it is very important that 'mishap' comes into the picture in l. 92., especially in its context, where blind fury was already mentioned ("Comes the blind Fury with the abhorred shears, / And slits the thin-spun life." line 75-76). So it seems that the harmony of nature is questioned, but the question seems illegitimate and the text seems to redirect responsibility from nature to uncontrollable factors like fury and mishap. And after this restitution of nature's authority, there is a long enumeration of different kind of flowers that should "strew the laureate hearse where Lycid lies" (line 152), so harmony seems to get recovered. Although a harmonious depiction of water in a poem written about someone who drowns is quite problematic, I think the task is fulfilled in the poem, especially in lines 166-178, where water is paralleled with the "ocean bed" beneath which the "day-star" sinks – not for eternal disappearance but for temporary hiding before a new beginning. And this new beginning is, of course, provided by Jesus Christ. This means that the ending of the poem offers a complete restoration of the organic order and of the way of Christian life. The last eight lines reinforce this restoration with a coherent, undisturbed view of nature.

As quoted by Samuel I. Mintz, Douglas Bush claims that "In 1600, the educated Englishman's mind and world were more than half medieval; by 1660 they were more than half modern" (Mintz 1980, 138). I think *Lycidas* is an excellent example of this transition in thought. The shift in thinking (from medieval to modern, or from organic to mechanic) can be beautifully traced in the poem, and I think that there is an interesting duality: on one hand, pastoral as a mode seems to be rejected, but the organic view of nature is reinforced.

V. Conclusion

My aim was two- or three-fold with this paper. After an exploration of the use of pastoral, I tried to perform a reading from an ecocritical approach. This was not done with the sole objective of understanding the poem – I also tried to understand (and to test) ecocriticism as such.

As for the pastoral side of the coin, my conclusion could be summed up in the following way: *Lycidas* is a pastoral text, but opposing to its predecessors (to give but one example, Spenser's *Astrophel*), it does not use the pastoral framework coherently. The poem leaves the framework in a surprising manner, especially with the pretext and the finishing eight lines. This meta-aspect means that the text, in a sense, reads itself, and seems to be dissatisfied with its own pastoral nature, which is well illustrated by the fact that except for one poem, Milton did not write any more (strictly) pastoral texts later.

However, I think the most important result of my paper is the proof that ecocriticism can provide a valid methodology for the reading of the poem, and I think it can be seen that this approach offers new insights into texts. The turning point nature was already highlighted about the poem (see Evans), but the ecocritical reading proved that besides a personal turning point, a change of thinking on a more general level is also present in the poem (organic – mechanic shift). This ecocritical reading was an experiment, and I hope its results prove convincing. Consequently, I think that the question of the quotation by the medical scientist can be explained in this way: the discourse about environmental crisis/different environmental issues is such an important context today that it simply cannot be neglected by present-day readers. And the real power of ecocriticism lies in the way it offers a methodology to perform investigations from this context and of this context at the same time.

References

Here it should be noted that this TDK paper was later developed into a significantly more detailed MA thesis, in which the biggest omission – the complete absence of the extensive scholarly literature on Milton in general and *Lycidas* in particular – had been at least partially amended. In this earlier form, the paper fails to reflect on this literature (neither is it its purpose), a distortion the reader should constantly keep in mind.

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