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A Note on Milton's *Lycidas*

The struggle between the pagan Classics and Christianity underlies much of Milton's poetry. In *Lycidas*, Milton achieves a tentative balance between the two by the positioning in the text of the figure of the river god Camus.

In *Lycidas*, Camus appears in a central position in the procession of mourners for the drowned shepherd. In the verse paragraph preceding the appearance of Camus, Milton has populated the text with river deities or personifications from Classical study and literature: Arethuse, a nymph that was transformed into a river to avoid the amorous pursuits of the river-god Alpheus and Mincius, the native river of Virgil. Immediately preceding Camus is Triton, the "herald of the sea" (l.89) standing in for Neptune and asking what "hard mishap hath doomed this gentle swain?" (l.92). Triton is in search of the cause of Lycidas's death. The result of his inquiry is that the drowning of Lycidas is the fault of neither the winds (personified by Hippotades, god of winds), nor the action of Panope or her sister Nereids.

Immediately after the appearance of Camus (and the last to leave) comes the "pilot of the Galilean lake" who also expresses grief at the passing of Lycidas. Camus appears, therefore, between the two extremes of the pagan representative of Neptune and the Christian pilot. With this in mind, Camus may be seen as acting in the role of a mediator or transitional element between these two poles.

It may be noted that water deities and personifications are present because of Lycidas's death by drowning—the guiding principle behind the numerous additional examples of water imagery in the poem. The figures from Classical

literature, it may be noted, make no claims on Lycidas and assert only innocence in his death. Camus's appearance is likewise non-active in the sense that he merely demands to know the cause of Lycidas's death. It is only with the appearance of the pilot of the Galilean lake that a figure with power or control of water forces appears. Earlier, Triton and the Nereids appear as stand-ins for the sea god Neptune and are themselves without real power; this impotence is also seen in the appearance of a powerless Camus able to merely mourn the passing of Lycidas. In contrast to these is the Christian image of the pilot of the Galilean lake. Not only is this figure a pilot—one who is able to manage water passage safely; but he is associated with the miracle of Christ's potent powers over water in the calming of the storm on Lake Galilee (Matthew 8:23-27; Luke 8:22-25) and walking on the water (Mark 6:45-52; John 6:16-21).

In the procession of water figures culminating in the Christian figure of the pilot, transcendence and rejection of the implicit pagan figures is voiced by the proactive pilot who tells us and Lycidas "how well could I have spared for thee" (l.113). As god of the river Cam which flows through the university town of Cambridge, this transitional association is important as it makes a connection between those virtues associated with the Classics and those of Christianity. In the actual references to Camus, this is not discussed openly, but seems to be implied in Camus's words "who hath reft (Quoth he) my dearest pledge?" (l.107). As Edward King (*Lycidas*) was a student at Cambridge, he would be a pledge or child of the university and that which the university stood for—learning, both the Classics and the Bible.

Camus may be seen, therefore, as the link between Classical learning represented by Neptune's herald and the Christian learning represented by the pilot of the Galilean lake. By uniting these two extremes in the figure of Camus, Milton's dilemma of the relationship of Classical and Christian learning is answered in the progressive and hierarchically related positions of the water figures. The watery powers manifested in the pilot are clearly spelled out in the next-to-last verse paragraph of the poem. Death, specifically the death of Lycidas, is not overcome through the mediated Classical/Christian study as personified in Camus. It is only by transcending learning and going directly to the word of God in the Bible that death is overcome and we need not fear death by drowning, since, like Christ, we will be able to "walk(ed) on the waves" (l.173).

SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION

Martin R. Kalfatovic