

The Sacred and the Profane in *Lycidas*

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Yusuke KUMAGAI

Introduction

Lycidas is the poem which John Milton wrote to mourn the sudden death of Edward King. Edward King graduated from the master's course at Cambridge University as well as Milton, and was said to be a genius from whom much was expected. We turn now to *Lycidas* Milton had also praised him. Edward King's venerable life ended when he drowned in an accident. In *Lycidas* his soul goes up to the sacred world and is accepted into Heaven.

This poem has a structure where Lycidas overcomes the world of "water" and becomes holy while he wanders over it. Edward King represents as Lycidas in the poem. Moreover, Milton, the narrator in the poem, goes to the gods to search where Lycidas' soul went because he is really sad to hear of the sudden death of Lycidas.

Lycidas consists of three parts. In the first part, Lycidas is the puppet of "water." In the second part, Lycidas can nearly walk on "water." In the third part, Lycidas can completely walk on "water." Milton's feelings change as Lycidas changes. Namely, it is essential to carefully follow the changing of Lycidas and Milton to deeply understand this poem. We also need to know the structure of this poem as it includes "separation from reality." Inamochi describes *Lycidas*' "separation from reality" as follows: "A genre called pastoral poem has the meaning of "separation from reality." We should consider this poem has a special meaning that exceeds a mere pastoral poem."¹

What does "separation from reality" mean? Analyzing this from the scientific study of religion, it becomes possible to clarify the meaning, and also to understand *Lycidas* much more, because the way objectively deconstructs and analyzes a religious occurrence and its psychology. *Lycidas* is a pastoral poem and also receives elements of Christianity. Milton lived as a Puritan, so this paper states the occurrence and change of feelings of Lycidas and Milton from the scientific study of religion.

In the last section, this paper describes the "sacred" and the "profane." This section is largely based on a researcher Mircea Eliade. Eliade was adept in the scientific study of religion. As Inamochi states "the special meanings exceeded by mere pastoral poem" by reading *The sacred and the profane*, Eliade's book. We can clearly analyze *Lycidas* by summarizing the question of what is "sacred" and what is "profane." This paper focuses on the "sacred" and the "profane" used in the field of the scientific study of religion, analyzes *Lycidas*, and concludes the sacred and the profane are meaningful for us.

I . Separation

In this section, I first describe Lycidas' situation as being troubled by "water." Edward King, a friend of Milton, who died at sea when he drowned in an accident, and his promising young life vanished. He is represented as Lycidas in the poem. Lycidas dies by "water," and he is also troubled by it after his death. We understand it from the intimation of the poet musician Orpheus in the poem. As Oepheus is troubled by "water" after Oepheus' death, Lycidas is also troubled by it. It is hinted by Orpheus that Lycidas cannot overcome "water" and wanders in it.

What could the Muse herself that Orpheus bore,
The Muse herself, for her enchanting son
Whom Universal nature did lament, (58 – 60)

Next, I describe Milton's feelings. Milton grieves about the sudden death of Lycidas, and expresses his sadness. Lycidas' soul is not accepted by reality, so Milton is confused about the differences between ideality and reality. Milton begins to look for Lycidas' soul out from his own pain, and asks why Lycidas needed to die so young life because he had a good future in front of him save for the Nymphs which destroyed his life.

But O the heavy change, now thou art gon,
Now thou art gon, and never must return ! (37 – 38)

Where were ye Nymphs when the remorseless deep
Closed o're the head of your loved Lycidas? (50 – 51)

Milton gets an answer to his questions. The answer is that Lycidas' soul can enter Heaven because his soul is good. In the poem, Phoebus' voice can be suddenly heard, and Lycidas is prophesied to be able to acquire fame by Jove. Since Lycidas lived a good life, his life was blessed with eternity. This eternity means his soul goes to Heaven after his life and he will receive happiness forever at the Revelation.

And perfect witness of all-judging Jove;
As he pronounces lastly on each deed,
Of so much fame in Heav'n expect thy meed. (82 – 84)

By grieving for Lycidas' death, Milton achieves "separation" from reality, goes to the sacred world, and looks for Lycidas' soul. There is a rite of passage in Milton's life. A rite of passage is a process for going away from one's old self and being transformed. "Separation" is the first stage in a rite of passage. Some event causes "separation" from reality before entry into the sacred world. Milton pursues "separation" from reality because of Lycidas' death. That is the

meaning of “separation from reality” stated by Inamochi.

II. Transition

In this section, I first describe Lycidas’ imperfect control of “water.” St. Peter appears and tells Milton about church in the poem. St. Peter reproaches the existing church because it did not accept Lycidas. The existing church has degenerated and has turned into a world of desire. Furthermore, he gets angry that the existing church yearns to become prosperous and has forgotten the original mission to save people. And, he also says the sacred church will happen after the judgment of God.

How well could I have spared for thee, young swain,
Enow of such as for heir bellies’ sake
Creep, and intrude, and climb into the fold? (113 – 115)

But that two-handed engine at the door,
Stands ready to smite once, and smite no more. (130 – 131)

St. Peter reproaching the existing church means Lycidas does not go well with the existing church. The difference from the existing church and the sacred church is clear because St. Peter’s violent reproach of the real church. Edward King was going to be a successful young man in the future because of his good behavior in his lifetime. He was also going to be a minister. Therefore his soul is shown to be accepted not by judgment of the existing church, but by Heaven or the sacred church which will appear after the judgment of God. The existing church suffers from finiteness spatially and temporally. On the other hand, the sacred church has all the eternity. That’s why Lycidas can have eternity because he can go to the sacred church.

St. Peter is a saint who relates to “water.” Inamochi describes the relation between St. Peter and “water” as follows. In the Bible, St. Peter did not initially believe that could walk on water. He is also known as the saint who could control it while he felt doubt. Lycidas is not able to control the world of “water” as mentioned earlier in this essay. But, it is suggested that he imperfectly controls it by the intervention of St. Peter.

St. Peter is a man who imperfectly walked on Galilee Lake, that is to say, he has a legend to imperfectly overcome reality of the time rule symbolized by water according to the context of *Lycidas*.²

Next, I describe Milton’s feelings. Milton enters the sacred world to look for Lycidas. Milton is still in despair over Lycidas’ death. Milton experiences the death of his friend, and separates from reality to meet the gods and a saint. Then, he tries to find out the answer for his

question why the existing world did not accept Lycidas' soul. And, he discovers from St.Peter the cruelty of reality and the appearance of the sacred church. Furthermore, Milton also knows about Lycidas' imperfect control of "water" and heads toward the sacred church.

And listens to the Herald of the sea
That came in Neptune's plea, (89 – 90)

And sage Hippotades their answer brings, (96)

Next Camus, reverend sire, went footing slow, (104)

Last came, and last did go,
The pilot of the Galilean lake; (108 – 109)

Milton carries out "separation" from the existing world, and comes to experience sacred space and time. This means "transition" in a rite of passage. "Transition" means the process between the person going away from the old self and the person being transformed. Namely, it means we slip out of the profane world we usually live in, and go into the sacred world. Milton separates from the existing world to enter the sacred world, and asks the gods and a saint various questions. That's how Milton shifts from "separation" to "transition."

III. Integration

In this section, I describe Lycidas' complete control of "water." Lycidas' life was ended by "water." His soul, however, becomes pure by being in the "sounding sea." That means Lycidas was equipped with nature not to be defeated by it. People have their fate crushed by reality similar to "water" or "sounding sea." The cruelty of reality sometimes makes people get over it, but sometimes despair. To Milton, God's grace can let people accept the cruelty of reality, so that's why Lycidas can also get over "water" as reality by God's grace.

whist thee the shores, and sounding seas
Wash far away, where'er thy bones are hurled,
Whether beyond the stormy Hebrides,
Where thou perhaps under the whelming tide
Visit'st the bottom of the monstrous world; (154 – 158)

Lycidas is led by Jesus to control water. In the Bible, Jesus is known to be able to walk on it and to quell the sounding sea. What does it mean to be led by Jesus? St.Peter could overcome it because of Jesus, and became the indispensable base of Christianity. Thus, Jesus' appearance has the implication that Lycidas can completely control "water." Lycidas overcomes water

and is accepted into Heaven by Jesus. Lycidas who represents King could not be a minister in the existing church because he was very young when he died, however, he can go into God's world by purifying his soul by controlling the world of "water."

So Lycidas sunk low, but mounted high,
Through the dear might of him that walked the waves,
Where other groves, and other streams along,
With nectar pure his oozy locks he laves,
And hears the unexpressive nuptial song,
In the blest kingdoms meek of joy and love. (172 – 177)

Next, I describe Milton's feelings. Milton as the narrator cannot accept Lycidas' death, and ask the gods and a saint where Lycidas is going. Then, Milton writes how Lycidas overcomes "water" and goes into Heaven by Jesus' power. Milton receives the answer he had been looking for, and regains the power to live at ease. That means not only Lycidas but also Milton is saved by Jesus' love.

Weep no more, woeful shepherds, weep no more,
For Lycidas your sorrow is not dead, (165 – 167)

Milton slips out the sacred world, and tries to return to the existing world. That means "integration" in a rite of passage. "Integration" means the person experiences sacred space and time, and returns to the profane world. Since Milton cannot accept his friend's death, he "separates" from the existing world. Then, he goes into the stage of "transition" to experience the sacred world. Finally, he enters the final stage, "integration" to get his answer, feel at ease and return to the profane world. That is to say, he experiences "separation" to "transition" to "integration." That's why he can slip out his old self and be born again with his thinking transformed.

IV. The sacred and the profane

In this section, I explain how the sacred and the profane function in *Lycidas*. Then, I discuss what the sacred and the profane mean. The sacred means the ultimate. The sacred is space and time which are completely apart from the profane. On the other hand, the profane means the world we usually live in. We are humans living with religion. A person would like to touch the sacred without fail if he/she has no faith because we people essentially seek the true, the good, and the beautiful. We are living with the sacred and the profane. Then, what is the difference between the two? Eliade quotes the sacred as follows.

As we saw, the sacred is pre-eminently the real, at once power, efficacy the source of life and fecundity. Religious man's desire to live in the sacred is in fact equivalent to his desire to take up his abode in objective reality, not to let himself be paralyzed by the never-ceasing relativity of purely subjective experiences, to live in a real and effective world, and not in an illusion.³

The sacred is strength, or "creative energy." A person feels fear and yearning for the sacred at first, then acquires "creativity" by touching it. This "creativity" means that people accept the cruelty of the existing world and keep their lives. The sacred produces "creativity." Meanwhile, what does the profane cause? Eliade describes the profane as follows.

The unknown space that extends beyond his world—an uncosmized because unconsecrated space, a mere amorphous extent into which no orientation has yet been projected, and hence in which no structure has yet arisen—for religious man, this profane space represents absolute nonbeing. If, by some evil chance, he stays in it, he feels emptied of his ontic substance, as if he were dissolving in Chaos, and he finally dies.⁴

Eliade says that a person will perish if they keep living in the profane space. It means to enter into chaos and not easily slip out from it. There, people are troubled with loneliness or loss, dismayed and suicidal without finding out the meanings of their existence. Moreover, profane space and time are the world of human desire. Since desire (called egoism) is rooted in human nature, we hurt the world and others when we do not control our desires. This comes from "destructive energy." Namely, the profane produces "destruction."

I will reconsider *Lycidas* based on the above. First, I describe what "water" means because it is an important symbol in *Lycidas*. Eliade quotes the symbol of "water" as follows.

But both on the cosmological and the anthropological planes immersion in the waters is equivalent not to a final extinction but to a temporary reincorporation into the indistinct, followed by a new creation, a new life, or a "new man," according to whether the moment involved is cosmic, biological, or soteriologica.⁵

Drowning means not "disappearance" but "rebirth." Although *Lycidas* disappeared from the existing world by drowning, he did not actually disappear. He is born anew by controlling "water," and is able to change it into the sacred. Drowning becomes creativity and salvation at last. *Lycidas* becomes "the Genius of the shore." He is raised to the sacred by getting over the profane. So, the reading *Lycidas* gives us "creativity."

Henceforth thou art the Genius of the shore,
In thy large recompense, and shalt be good
To all that wander in that perilous flood. (183 – 185)

Milton can find Lycidas, “the Genius of the shore” while he experiences sacred space and time. Milton passes through from “separation” to “transition” to “integration,” because he finally meets “the Genius of the shore.” Milton can accept Lycidas’ death and also have “creativity.” Milton’s most famous words are shown below and they came out of his creativity. When young Milton touches the sacred, he finds hope and a power to keep his life. And, this “creativity” gives him a powerful motive to life. This powerful motive affects his later politics and poetry. That’s why Milton writes the following famous words.

And now the sun had stretched out all the hills,
And now was dropped into the western bay;
At last he rose, and twitched his mantle blue:
Tomorrow to fresh woods, and pastures new. (190 – 194)

The sacred and the profane are completely opposite. The sacred is the energy of “creativity,” and the profane is the energy of “destruction.” There are death, sickness, and parting from someone in this life which cannot be easily accepted. It is too hard to find out the meaning from this reality. But, Milton gives us a way to accept the sadness and keep our lives as God saves us. That’s why those living in the profane world can acquire a powerful motive to live and “creativity” to touch the sacred.

Conclusion

First of all, I described how Lycidas reached the sacred world by controlling water. Writing the poem helped Milton to remove his sadness. Milton could be born anew by experiencing sacred space and time through a rite of passage. And, Milton touching the sacred could rise up and get “creativity” which gave him strength to live. Furthermore, Lycidas becoming “the Genius of the shore” symbolizes the giving great energy to us.

Finally, I described the sacred and the profane by Eliade who is apprehensive about the ruin of the sacred because of civilization. There are few opportunities to touch the sacred which causes us to live in chaos. Then, people hurt each other, and the world is full of confusion when the destructive element is strong. People have egoism in their nature, so destruction exhausts our humanity and nature. Meanwhile, the sacred is in an isolated place, and produces “creativity.” People have pain and worry, but kindness, warmth, and courage from the sacred can save many people. Experiencing the sacred is essential to having “creativity” if we want to smile or be happy. So, that’s the meaning of the sacred which shines against the cruelty of reality.

Notes

1. This is my translation.
稲用茂夫. 86頁.
2. This is my translation.
稲用茂夫. 86頁.
3. Eliade, Mircea. pp28-29.
4. Eliade, Mircea. p64.
5. Eliade, Mircea. p130-131

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