

# THE PASTORAL ELEGY IN LITERATURE, PAINTING, AND MUSIC: FROM THEOCRITUS TO VIRGIL TO MILTON AND BEYOND

#### **EDWARD R. RAUPP**

Doctor of Philology, Professor of Gori State University Chavchavadze Street, #53, Gori, 1400, Georgia +995 599 11 66 56 <u>edwardraupp@gu.edu.ge</u> https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5147-7835

**Abstract** Pastoral elegy has deep historical roots, manifesting in literature, painting, and music. To understand and appreciate John Milton's pastoral elegy, *Lycidas*, it is essential that one explore both the history of the form and its three genres. Theocritus invented the pastoral elegy in the 4th century BCE to lament the passing of a friend. Virgil used the Idylls of Theocritus as a template for his *Eclogues* in 1st century Rome, and Milton drew on both ancient poets to mourn the loss of Edward King in his *Lycidas*. While these are works of literature, one may also find common themes in painting and music. This study aims to identify those themes and, thereby, discover what it is that causes pastoral elegy to endure through the ages to express that aspect of humanity that responds to the loss of a loved one. We find that the overarching theme in all three genres is *evocation*. The words of Theocritus, Virgil, and Milton, the paintings of Boucher and Gatto, and the music of James Last and Gheorghe Zamfir all evoke feelings of quiet contemplation in serene pastoral settings.

Keywords: elegy, literature, Milton, music, painting, pastoral, Theocritus, Virgil

#### Introduction

Students who come to a course in Milton will, if the course is true to the poet's complete works, encounter Milton's pastoral elegy, *Lycidas* (Milton, 1638/2023), what critics call "the highwater mark of English Poesy," "probably the most perfect piece of pure literature in existence," and "the greatest short poem of any author in English" (Womack, 1997, p. 119). It is not alone the acclamation of critics but the form and substance of the poem that leads us to ask whether and, if so, to what extent the genre of pastoral elegy may be found in other forms of art, such as painting and music.

#### The Importance of the Problem

This subject arises in the context of teaching Milton to students for whom English is not a native language. Even native speakers, however, may lack sufficient background in Biblical and classical literature to understand the dynamics of the poem, much less its references or its poesy. Combining the genres of literature and the largely nonverbal genres of painting and music may offer pathways to appreciating *Lycidas* in particular and pastoral elegy in general.

Researchers into the pastoral elegy and those who teach Milton's *Lycidas* must contend with the notion of the juxtaposition of the adjective and the noun. Is *pastoral* a subset of the elegy, or is the *elegy* a subset of the pastoral?

### **The Relevant Scholarship**

Seminal criticism of pastoral elegy is as ancient as literary criticism itself. Much scholarship is available on the genre of pastoral elegy (Ferry, 2000; Sacks, 1985; Virgil, 2005; Wittreich, 1970). Art appreciation and music appreciation similarly enjoy a substantial body of scholarship (eDL, 2023; Finney, 1952; Funch, 1997; Saylor, 2023; Woody & Burns, 2001). A



preliminary effort, however, yields no evidence of scholarship at the nexus of these three genres.

It is a mistake to limit the search for relevant scholarship to the most recent publications. For example, Hanford's 1910 article, "The pastoral elegy and Milton's Lycidas," is a classic in Milton scholarship on Lycidas. Any serious scholar writing on the poem must, most certainly, use Hanford's article as a reference. Consider also, the criticism of *Lycidas* by Samuel Johnson and its important analysis by Sigworth (1967). In current literary research, it could be argued that the most recent articles simply nibble around the edges of a substantial body of work from past decades and even past centuries.

### Method

The method used for this research includes three approaches: First is a close reading of *Lycidas* to identify characteristics that might be found in other literary texts, in music, and in painting. Second is a survey of the learned journals to find published works that may reflect on the nexus of these three genres. The third is to search for music and paintings to find similar characteristics. This triangulation assumes that a combination of methods is more robust than one method alone and is made possible by modern means of access to a myriad of texts, musical performances, and paintings.

Access to the full text of the poem for close reading is readily available in printed anthologies (e.g., Orgel & Goldberg, 2008), as well as online (e.g., Project Gutenberg, 1996). YouTube is an excellent resource for music, especially for the notes and references for each video, which provide leads for further research using JSTOR and other databases of scholarly articles.

The second approach, a survey of the literature, is similarly facilitated by a plethora of electronic databases, many of which are free of cost.

The third approach can be hypnotic, as one watches the visual images and listens to the music

on such platforms as Apple Music, Spotify, and YouTube.

# Results

# Definitions

*pastoral.* One definition given by the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED, 2023) is "Of poetry, music, pictures, etc.: portraying rural life or characters, esp. in an idealized or romantic manner; bucolic." Another is "pleasingly peaceful and innocent: idyllic." For Rabb (2010), the *pastoral* represents "Nature as a comforting source of peaceful and spiritual sustenance." Hanford (1910, p. 405) reflects on "the sober realities of Sicilian Shepherd life," with which Theocritus was familiar (Schenck, 1988). In other words, the "idyllic" shepherd's life was not all fun and games, frolicking on the meadow with flocks of wooly companions.

*elegy.* "A song or poem of lamentation, esp. for the dead; a memorial poem" (OED, 2023). "A poem in elegiac couplets," but more commonly, "a song or poem expressing sorrow or lamentation, especially for one who is dead." Sacks (1985, p. 2) traces *elegy* to the Greek couplets accompanied by the pan flute, Pan, of course, being the half-human, half-goat, lustful, flute-playing Arcadian deity of fertility.

As to the *pastoral elegy*, Sacks (1985, p. 9) notes, "The dead, like the forbidden object of a primary desire, must be separated from the poet, partly by a veil of words."

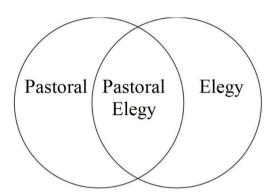
To be clear, there are pastoral poems, and there are elegies. As illustrated in Figure 1, below, there are pastoral poems that are not elegies (lamenting the dead), there are elegies that are not pastoral (evoking the presumed idyllic life of the shepherd in the meadow), and there are pastoral poems that are elegies (or, if you will, elegies that are pastoral).



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**Figure 1** The Nexus of Pastoral Poetry and Elegy



One of the most familiar of the first, the non-elegiac pastoral, is Christopher Marlowe's poem, "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love," the first line of which is often quoted even by those who cannot recite the rest: "Come live with me and be my love" (Quiller-Couch, 1989, p. 179). The Romantics wrote many pastorals that were not elegies. Wordsworth (2006, pp. 152-160) wrote "Michael," also a pastoral poem that is not an elegy, two lines of which are, "Upon the forestside in Grasmere Vale/There dwelt a Shepherd, Michael was his name."

A pastoral elegy, then, is at the nexus of these two poetic forms. *Lycidas* is at the nexus, as is Shelley's *Adonais: An Elegy on the Death of John Keats:* "I weep for Adonais - he is dead!" (Sacks, 1985, pp. 138-165).

Beer (2008, p. 60) notes, "The shepherdpoet is, as so often in Milton's early poetry, the embodiment of an ideal...," that ideal of a pensive contemplation of a quiet nature evoked, in the case of the pastoral elegy, by the death of someone esteemed by the speaker. We see the evocation in *Idyll I* of Theocritus, Bion's "Lament for Adonis" (Drake, 1923), and *Eclogues V* and X of Virgil, and we see it again in Milton's *Lycidas*.

### **Common Characteristics**

This study finds characteristics that are common to the three genres of literature, painting, and music in the area of pastoral arts, some of which may be more specific to pastoral elegy. If there is a single word that best captures the nexus of the three genres in the pastoral elegy, that word is "evocative." Pastoral poetry, painting, and music all have themes that evoke images of nature, sheep, and shepherds, as well as a peaceful scene.

Regardless of the genre, the creator of the work is telling a story. Barry (2017, p.223) refers to this process as "narratology...how narratives make meaning, and what the basic mechanisms and procedures are which are common to all acts of storytelling." In a sense, then, each writer, painter, and musician in this study is telling a story in his or her own medium. The writer uses words, the painter uses images, and the musician uses sounds. All tell stories.

Our research shows that some stories of pastoral elegy, in their various media, focus on the *pastoral* while others focus on the *elegy*.

In the case of *Lycidas*, Milton contributes a pastoral elegy to a volume dedicated to the memory of a Cambridge friend, Edward King, who perished at sea. King, however, was never as close a friend to Milton as Charles Diodati, with whom Milton had numerous exchanges in writing (Brown, 2011). Nevertheless, Milton was at pains to demonstrate the compatibility of the learned life and sociability (Brown, p. 73), which he did in *Lycidas*.

(1984)Diniz notes Milton's "intermingling" of Paganism and Christianity in a time of conflict between Catholicism and Puritanism in Britain. Perhaps what distinguishes Lycidas and makes it unique in pastoral elegy is the powerful, unsubtle, underlying text attacking the Church of England and its clerics. The death of Edward King, and the invitation to contribute to a book of memories, provide an opportunity for Milton to condemn both the Catholic church and the official state church, and he did so in such a manner as to cause the poem to be banned by the Anglican bishopric for some twenty years after his death (Elledge, 1966).



#### Literature

We trace the origins of pastoral elegy as a literary genre to the Sicilian idylls of the Greek poet Theocritus in the 3rd century BCE (Rist, 2009; Theocritus, 2023) and to the *Eclogues* of the Roman poet Virgil (70-19 BCE) (Ferry, 2000; Virgil, 2005). In the opening lines of Theocritus's *Idyll I*, "The Death of Daphnis," the shepherd Thyrsis says to a goatherd

Sweet are the whispers of yon pine that makes

Low music o'er the spring, and, Goatherd, sweet

Thy piping; second thou to Pan alone.

Is his the horned ram? then thine the goat.

Is his the goat? to thee shall fall the kid;

And toothsome is the flesh of unmilked kids. (Theocritus, 2023, p. 1)

When we hear Thyrsis lament, "Where were ye, Nymphs, oh where, while Daphnis pined?" we know we will hear its echo in *Lycidas*, when the speaker asks, after the death of Milton's friend, Edward King, drowned in the Irish Sea,

Where were ye, Nymphs, when the remorseless deep

Clos'd o'er the head of your lov'd Lycidas? (Milton, 1638/2023)

The opening dialogue in Eclogue V between the shepherds Menalcas and Mopsus also makes the connection between the two genres of literature and music, with Menalcas saying, "Mopsus, let us sit down together here/In this elm and hazel grove, two good musicians./You at the shepherd's pipe and I at singing" (Ferry, 2000, p. 35). The two shepherds then go on to eulogize their friend Daphnis, with Mopsus declaring, "Scatter the ground with flowers, all you shepherds,/And shade with mourning trees the woodland springs— /Thus Daphnis has commanded for his honor./Then build a tomb and place on the tomb these verses;/'Daphnis was known to these woods and known to the stars;/Lovely the flock, and lovelier still the shepherd." Menalcas responds in kind with, "Daphnis shall be high/Among the stars; I too was loved by Daphnis" (Ferry, 2000, p. 39).

Virgil concluded the *Eclogues* with Eclogue X, implicitly acknowledging his debt to Theocritus and changing the Greek Daphnis to the speaker's Roman friend Gallus. He also confirmed the source of the pastoral elegy as the harsh region of Arcadia, the home of Pan [more on Pan under Music, below], and ends by gifting us the adage, *Omnia vincit amor* [love conquers all], which adorns the brooch of the Prioress in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*.

In *Lycidas*, "Milton recognized the pastoral as one of the natural modes of literary expression, sanctioned by classic practice, and recommended by not inconsiderable advantages of its own" (Hanford, 1910, p. 403).

Moving to the Romantic Era (c. 1798-1837), Wordsworth wrote, in *Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood*, "Though nothing can bring back the hour of splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower;/We will grieve not, rather find/Strength in what remains behind" (Quiller-Couch, 1989, p. 632).

Sacks (1985) examines the genre of the elegy in English literature from Spenser (1552/53-1599) to Yeats (1865-1939) and refers to the elegy as a "work of mourning" (p. 1). Indeed, Yeats, having expressed a disinclination to write a war poem, nevertheless creates a "work of mourning" in his pastoral elegy, "Shepherd and Goatherd," on the death of his friend, Robert Gregory, the son of Yeats's patron, Lady Gregory. Robert Gregory was a major in the Royal Flying Corps who crashed his plane in World War I (Sacks, 1985, p. 261). In a follow-up, Yeats wrote what he and most critics believed to be a better work, the non-pastoral elegy, "In Memory of Major Robert Gregory." It takes little imagination to see that one of Yeats's most anthologized verses, "An Irish Airman Foresees His Death" (Yeats, 1919/2008, p. 111) can be considered an elegy in the making. [A fruitful area for further research might be the nexus



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of the elegy, both pastoral and non-pastoral, and war poetry.]

### Painting

It may be argued, as we do here, that the arts of the Western pastoral tradition have their roots in the Arcadian region of the Peloponnesian Peninsula, with its rough terrain, more suitable than the big cities of Athens, Thebes, and Sparta for communing with and contemplating the beauty of nature. We see the beginning of that tradition in Theocritus and Virgil, or as Ruff (Ruff, 2015, p. 1), writes of the Arcadian evocation,

> We have all dwelt in Arcadia. Experienced lying in the summer sun, with the perfume of wild flowers carried by warm soft breezes, with a gentle hum of insects filling the air, a picnic enjoyed with friends, all recalled as a time suffused with a sense of happiness and well-being

> Paintings of pastoral scenes are prolific. Although landscape frescoes date back to the Bronze age (Thera Foundation, 2023), modern pastoral paintings (the *bambochade*), as in Figure 2, appear to have been introduced by François Boucher around 1730 (EPPH, 2023).

# Figure 2

Boucher's Pastoral landscape with a shepherd and shepherdess



To accompany his video of soprano Netania Davrath singing Joseph Canteloube's Baïlèro, Harris (2021) offers a stunning array of pastoral scenes by the following painters: Rudolf Epp, Johann Baptist Hofner, William-Adolphe Bouguereau, Nicolae Grigorescu, Albert Roosenboom, Rosa Bonheur, Cornelius van Leemputten, Theodore Gerard, Luigi Chialiva, Hans Dahl, Daniel Ridgway Knight, Filippo Palizzi, Edmond Jean Baptiste Tschaggeny, Camille Joseph Etienne Roqueplan, and Winslow Homer. Paul Gatto's oil painting, "The Shepherdess," is a classic representation of the style (Gatto, 2023).

### Figure 3

### The Shepherdess, by Paul A. Gatto



Daniel Ridgway Knight was a prolific painter of pastoral scenes. His Shepherdess in Figure 4, below, is another example of the contemplative young woman at one with Nature.



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**Figure 4** Shepherdess, by Daniel Ridgway Knight



#### Music

How did the pan flute come to be associated with the pastoral elegy? Ovid (8 CE/2021, pp. 18-19) describes the lust of the god Pan for the Arcadian Naiad-nymph Syrinx. A chaste devotee of the virgin goddess Artemis, Syrinx fled from the clutches of Pan. Before Pan could catch her, Syrinx was changed into a hollow reed. Pan cut some of the reeds in different lengths and tied them together to make what is now called the pan flute. So every time Pan puts his lips to the flute, he imagines that he is kissing Syrinx.

The pan flute has been described as a "pastoral, lonely instrument with a sweet soft, hollow, prattling tone" (Strangways, 1929, p. 60). One can certainly hear that tone in the elegiac tale of The Lonely Shepherd, composed by James Last (1978) and played by the Romanian master, Gheorghe Zamfir, with the orchestra of André Rieu (Rieu & Zamfir, 2018). The Welsh legend of The Lonely Shepherd tells of a shepherd who, with his constant criticism, drove his wife to suicide, after which he lamented his behavior (Buja, 2015; Watkins, 2020).

**Figure 5** Introduction to The Lonely Shepherd by James

Last (Last, 1978)



An example of pastoral music that is not an elegy, but nevertheless evokes the feeling of the shepherdess amid her flock as surely as do the paintings of Boucher, Knight, and Gatto is Joseph Canteloube's haunting *Baïlèro* (Anon., n.d.; Classical Tyro, 2018).

The terrain of Arcadia is harsh. "The one quality that softened the brutishness of Arcadian life was music, whether performed by the goatherds or played by Pan" (Ruff, 2015, p. 1). Though pastoral elegies may be criticized as "artificial," (Hanford, 1910; Kelly, 1968; Norlin, 1911) as their creators, whether in literature, painting, or music, live mainly in cities, the evocation is far from artificial. And it is not only the pan flute that evokes feelings of quiet serenity, as, for example, the cello, with its warm tone.

Birnbaum (2012) analyzes the impact that the cello has on listeners' feelings, with its "soulful, vocal qualities" (p.1). In particular, Edward Elgar's Elegy for String Orchestra, Op 58, is both soulful and evocative of memories of a lost loved one. The recording of conductor Roger Norrington (2013) is a superb example of the application of the cello to the elegy. Although not specifically described as an elegy, Elgar's Cello Concerto in E Minor, Op. 85, clearly matches the criteria of the genre, especially as played by Jacqueline du Pré (1963).



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For Finney (1952), Lycidas "has a design that eludes definition" (p. 325), but its clarity may be enhanced when at least portions of the poem are set to music, including music to accompany the dance. The themes of nature, love, and loss may be seen, also, in such ballet performances as Swan Lake, Giselle, The Firebird, The Rite of Spring, and La Sylphide. Symphony No. 3 by Vaughan Williams (1922) is titled "A Pastoral Symphony."

#### Discussion

By placing in juxtaposition the three genres in which pastoral elegy is expressed, viz., literature, painting, and music, we discover several common characteristics, but the overarching theme of all three is that they are evocative. This is an important finding for those who teach such works as Milton's Lycidas to students at any level, but especially to those for whom English is not a native language. The student may be offered a triangulation to discern meaning, for paintings and music transcend verbal signs and symbols.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

The study answers the question as to whether and, if so, to what extent the genre of pastoral elegy may be found in other forms of art, such as painting and music. Pastoral poetry, elegies, and pastoral elegies share common characteristics, and the most significant of these is that they are all evocative. The pastoral dimension evokes feelings of the serenity of Nature, while the elegy evokes feelings of loss.

While the pastoral elegy has been studied extensively, there appears to be a need for more research into the nexus of the genres in which the topic is considered. Such research is recommended for graduate students in English language and literature.

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