

# Shakespeare's Metaphysical Poem: Allegory, Metaphysics, and Aesthetics in 'The Phoenix and Turtle'

Ted Tregear

Long treated as a poetic curio or a biographical riddle, Shakespeare's poetic contribution to the 1601 *Loves Martyr*—usually known as 'The Phoenix and Turtle'—has recently been reclaimed as an experiment in metaphysical poetry. This essay sets out to ask what that means: for the poem, for metaphysical poetry, and for metaphysics itself. It argues that Shakespeare draws on the language of metaphysics, and its canonical problems, to test the relationship between poetic and philosophical thinking. It follows the poem as it charts the efforts, and failures, of both allegory and metaphysics to apprehend the thought-defying love between phoenix and turtle. It shows how that love engages the dilemma of the particular and the universal, a dilemma native to metaphysics since Aristotle, but felt most acutely in the realm of aesthetic experience. And it suggests that, in sounding out the limits of metaphysical reason, Shakespeare's poem allows for poetry to think in a way that metaphysics cannot. 'The Phoenix and Turtle' ends in mourning: for the death of phoenix and turtle, and for the demise of the metaphysical transcendentals they seemed in hindsight to uphold. That mourning might nonetheless offer poetry its vocation, as the space where reason might remember and reflect on the object of its loss.

When, in 1601, John Marston read through Shakespeare's latest poem, the word that came to his mind was *metaphysical*. 'O Twas a mouing *Epicedium*', he enthused, in the contribution to the 1601 *Loves Martyr* placed immediately after Shakespeare's own.<sup>1</sup> His praise is shared between that epicedium and its subjects, the phoenix and turtle-dove that he, like Shakespeare, sets out to memorialize. Marston soon warms to his theme:

Lo now; th'xtracture of deuinest *Essence*,  
The Soule of heauens labour'd *Quintessence*,  
(*Peans to Phoebus*) from deare Louer's death,  
Takes sweete creation and all blessing breath.

(*LM*, 2A1<sup>r</sup>)

<sup>1</sup> John Marston, 'A Narration and Description of a Most Exact Wondrous Creature, Arising out of the Phoenix and Turtle Doves Ashes', in *Loves Martyr, or, Rosalins Complaint* (London, 1601), 2A1<sup>r</sup>; further references to this volume marked in parentheses.

Whatever issues from these lovers' death is more refined than essence, more ensouled than quintessence, against whose creation the heavens' own alchemy looks laboured. That labour, the sheer effort of working out what has just happened, becomes the subject of Marston's poem, and draws him towards the rich but recondite domain of metaphysics:

Raise my inuention on swift Phantasie,  
That whilst of this same *Metaphisicall*  
God, Man, nor Woman, but elix'd of all  
My labouring thoughts, with strained ardor sing,  
My Muse may mount with an vncommon wing.

(2A1<sup>r</sup>)

Squeezed out in italics like the poem's other terms of art, '*Metaphisicall*' hangs at the end of the line, as though sucking the air out of Marston's lungs. As the poet recovers, he finds it hard to work out what, exactly, might be metaphysical here: 'God', 'Man', and 'Woman' are all possibilities, but with *nor*, all are revoked as inadequate to the task. The result is a word left somewhere between an adjective and a noun, so transcending all substantives that it becomes almost substantial in itself. Marston follows Shakespeare to the heights of metaphysics; but what is metaphysical about Shakespeare's poem, it seems, is all but unspeakable.

Marston enjoyed ramping up his diction like this. By 1601, it had become a hallmark of his style, which grazes along the knife-edge of grandiloquence and pretension: polysyllabic, neologistic, and conspicuously philosophical. 'No speech is Hyperbolicall, | To this perfection blessed', he claims, and he puts that claim to the test. Compared to that perfection, 'that boundlesse *Ens*', 'all Beings' are 'deck'd and stained'; '*Ideas* that are idly fained | Onely here subsist inuested' (*LM*, 2A1<sup>v</sup>). Lines like these made Marston a pioneer in what Patrick Cheney has recently christened the 'metaphysical sublime', a poetry that propels itself into raptures beyond thinking's customary bounds.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, his contribution to *Loves Martyr* is the first time a seventeenth-century poem identifies itself, albeit by association, as metaphysical. The word's application to a certain style of poetry—smart, witty, metaphorically and conceptually audacious—predates its usage by Samuel Johnson, and earlier by John Dryden, both of them usually credited with bequeathing the idea of 'metaphysical poetry' to literary criticism. As early as the 1640s, William Drummond was already defending poetry against those who 'endevured to abstracte her to Metaphisicall Ideas, and Scholasticall Quiddities'.<sup>3</sup> Drummond was most likely thinking of John Donne, whose *Poems* had recently appeared in print; but he may equally have been thinking of *Loves Martyr*, which appears on his reading list from 1606.<sup>4</sup> If Marston can be read as a metaphysical poet *avant la lettre*, so too can the poet he celebrates in such glowing terms. Shakespeare's poem in *Loves Martyr* is untitled; it merely begins, with disorienting simplicity, 'Let the bird of lowdest lay'. Since the nineteenth century, it has been known as 'The Phoenix and Turtle'—a title which, however convenient, risks begging the question, in distinguishing from the outset two lovers whose divisions are rendered so massively vexing. Mired for much of its existence in historical and biographical speculation regarding its cast of characters, the poem has more recently been reclaimed as a vital document in literary history. 'The Phoenix and Turtle', James Bednarz argues, is 'the first great published "metaphysical" poem in English'.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Patrick Cheney, 'Marstonian Authorship: The Poems, Plays, and Masque', *RES*, 73 (2022), 648–69; Cheney, '*Artes poeticae*: Spenser, Donne, and the Metaphysical Sublime', in Yulia Ryzhik (ed.), *Spenser and Donne: Thinking Poets* (Manchester, 2019), 85–107.

<sup>3</sup> William Drummond, 'A Letter on the True Nature of Poetry, Addressed to Dr Arthur Johnston', in Robert H. MacDonald (ed.), *William Drummond of Hawthornden: Poems and Prose* (Edinburgh, 1976), 191. For a fuller pre-history (omitting Drummond), see Arthur H. Nethercot, 'The Term "Metaphysical Poets" before Johnson', *MLN*, 37 (1922), 11–17.

<sup>4</sup> Robert H. MacDonald, *The Library of Drummond of Hawthornden* (Edinburgh, 1971), 228.

<sup>5</sup> James P. Bednarz, *Shakespeare and the Truth of Love: The Mystery of 'The Phoenix and Turtle'* (Basingstoke, 2012), 196.

Following Marston's cue, this essay sets out to read Shakespeare's poem as an experiment in metaphysical poetry, and to understand what that might mean: for the poem, for metaphysical poetry, and for metaphysics itself. These terms are on the move in literary scholarship. Long regarded with some suspicion, and retained, if at all, with caution, the idea of metaphysical poetry has been taken up by recent scholars as an invitation to reconsider the affinity between poetry and metaphysics in seventeenth-century writing. Work by Gordon Teskey, Wendy Beth Hyman, James Kuzner, and others, has shown how lyrics like Shakespeare's might be metaphysical, not by rehearsing metaphysical arguments, or reciting their terms of art, but by pursuing a kind of thinking in excess of philosophy.<sup>6</sup> 'The Phoenix and Turtle' itself should dispel any lingering assumptions that a poem's philosophical content must be extracted and formalized before it can count as truly philosophical. Such a position would accept that whatever knowledge poetry offered must be revoiced in the language of reason; whereas, as we will see, it is Reason that must borrow poetry's voice for its '*Threne*'. Meanwhile, elsewhere in early modern scholarship, metaphysics has been reconceived as a much broader enterprise than previously thought, encompassing a greater variety of writers, forms, and styles.<sup>7</sup> Yet the problem of its definition—of what counts as metaphysics—has only grown starker as a result. In a sense, the history of metaphysics is the history of its attempts to define itself.<sup>8</sup> As the pursuit of the most extreme or original principles of knowledge, it is continually running up against the challenge that these are things it cannot, or should not, know. From the outset, its claims to primacy are hedged by doubts, not only over whether it has the right to make those claims—the first of the puzzles (*aporiai*) Aristotle poses in his *Metaphysics*, whether there can be a single science of first causes—but over what is lost from view when it does.<sup>9</sup> In reading 'The Phoenix and Turtle' as a metaphysical poem, then, this essay does not look to establish a substantive metaphysics beneath it, nor to splice metaphysics and poetry together without distinction or division. Instead, it looks to this poem to uncover the catachrestic energy latent within the category of 'metaphysical poetry'—a category that might best be thought of as an instance of its own best-known operation, by which, in Samuel Johnson's words, '[t]he most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together'.<sup>10</sup> Recognizing the tension coiled within this critical term, the resistance revealed and released by such synthetic force, might thus shed new light on poetry, and on metaphysics too.

In Shakespeare's case, this turns on the question of what, if anything, can be known about the strange union between a phoenix and a turtle-dove. Like Marston, Shakespeare is grappling with what to call the compound at his poem's heart, and what it might mean for its beholders and survivors. To do this, the poem tests out various strategies of poetic apprehension, trying first allegory, then metaphysics, before admitting defeat. From that defeat emerges a fresh sense of the matter on which this poem sets to work, and the matter of the poem itself; and with that, the poem reaches the juncture between metaphysics and poetry, where the failure of even the subtlest concepts gives onto the puzzlement of aesthetic experience. The following three parts of this

<sup>6</sup> See, among others, Gordon Teskey, 'The Metaphysics of the Metaphysicals', in Michael Schoenfeldt (ed.), *John Donne in Context* (Cambridge, 2019), 236–46; Wendy Beth Hyman, *Impossible Desire and the Limits of Knowledge in Renaissance Poetry* (Oxford, 2019); James Kuzner, *The Form of Love: Poetry's Quarrel with Philosophy* (New York, NY, 2021); and Ted Tregear, 'Hope Against Hope: Abraham Cowley and the Metaphysics of Poetry', forthcoming in *ELH*. Timothy Harrison and Elizabeth Harvey propose 'physical' as a better adjective for Donne's poetry, for its knowing investigations into the relationship between physical and metaphysical: Harrison and Harvey, *John Donne's Physics* (Chicago, IL, 2024). I am grateful to Dr Harrison for sharing this forthcoming work with me.

<sup>7</sup> See especially Emily Thomas (ed.), *Early Modern Women on Metaphysics* (Cambridge, 2018).

<sup>8</sup> See A. W. Moore, *The Evolution of Modern Metaphysics: Making Sense of Things* (Cambridge, 2012). For problems of definition, see also Theodor W. Adorno, *Metaphysics: Concept and Problems*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, tr. Edmund Jephcott (Cambridge, 2000), 1–9.

<sup>9</sup> 'The first puzzle concerns the thing we mentioned first, whether it belongs to one science or to more than one to theorize all the kinds of causes': Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, ed. Werner Jaeger (Oxford, 1957), 996a18–20, translations my own.

<sup>10</sup> Samuel Johnson, 'Cowley', in Roger Lonsdale (ed.), *The Lives of the Poets*, 4 vols (Oxford, 2006), 1. 200.

essay thus follow the three moments in Shakespeare's poem, passing through allegory to metaphysics into aesthetics. As the contours of an early modern aesthetics become sharper, thanks to Rachel Eisendrath and others, so it becomes more plausible to read Shakespeare's poem as an enquiry into the problem on which metaphysics and aesthetics converge: the dialectic of the universal and particular.<sup>11</sup> Of all the puzzles treated in the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle judged, this was 'the hardest of all, and most necessary to theorize' (*Met*, 999a24–5). The waning force of Aristotle's hylomorphic explanation throughout the seventeenth century, under the pressure of corpuscularian thought, brought the problem's difficulties into sharper focus.<sup>12</sup> Yet although it falls within the sphere of metaphysics, the disturbances it causes are most keenly felt in aesthetic experience. For the philosophy of aesthetics from Kant onwards, finding something beautiful means encountering a particular that will not be subsumed under a universal concept, but will not renounce its right to some sort of universality. As an obstacle to the reconciliation of particulars and universals, beauty is a scandal for reason, not only because it resists the knowing of the universal, but because it refuses to accept the contrary status of sheer material irrationality. Instead, it holds onto the prospect that the particular, sensuous and fragile, might hold a claim to truth—and that, by stopping its ears to that claim, reason makes itself irrational. This does not mean advocating particular against universal, object against concept. It means, instead, attempting to retrieve a new and better universal, one that is able to reflect on reason's unacknowledged investments.

Something like this drama unfolds over the course of 'The Phoenix and Turtle'. Grappling with the love and death of the phoenix and turtle drives the poem to try out new-found capacities of scholastic thinking, only to end up exposing the need that thinking serves. At its centre is a critique of reason as Reason, suddenly rendered visible as an all-too-particular personification, and forced to voice its own shortcomings. Reason is thus returned to the world it seemingly rises above, as a material force in the regime of property and property's rationalization. Yet if the union of the phoenix and turtle provokes this critique, it does not succeed it with a regime of its own. The truth of love is visible on departure; far from championing its cause, the poem marks its passing. 'The Phoenix and Turtle' ends in an elegy for the lovers who only in hindsight outstrip rationalization—an elegy that is, moreover, itself an attempt to rationalize. After all, the fact that its closing 'Threnos' is spoken by Reason itself, 'As *Chorus* to their Tragique Scene' (l.52), reveals the extent, both to which reason has been unsettled, and to which poetry remains invested in reason.<sup>13</sup> In this sense, Shakespeare's poem cannot escape the critique of metaphysics it ventures. Both metaphysics and poetry are ways of thinking whose vaunted powers are stalked by suspicions of redundancy. Both prove incapable of doing justice to the lovers they remember. And both are reduced, at last, to mourning: metaphysics, by the confounding of its desire for knowledge; poetry, by the recognition that it cannot deduce some posterity from these vanished lovers, let alone be that posterity itself. In that conjunction, however, both metaphysics and poetry afford a better sense of what they have lost. The shortcomings of the poem's metaphysical concepts are determinate: they are what allow the departed particulars to be represented without being traduced. Poetry, likewise, makes those particulars mournable. In a poem that leads from the failure of the concept to the tomb of its objects, Shakespeare presses the metaphysical

<sup>11</sup> See Rachel Eisendrath, *Poetry in a World of Things: Aesthetics and Empiricism in Renaissance Ekphrasis* (Chicago, IL, 2018); Emily Vasiliauskas, *The Skull in the Mirror: Aesthetics in the Age of Shakespeare* (in progress); Hugh Grady, *Shakespeare and Impure Aesthetics* (Cambridge, 2009); and Paul A. Kottman (ed.), *The Insistence of Art: Aesthetic Philosophy after Early Modernity* (New York, NY, 2017).

<sup>12</sup> For seventeenth-century responses, see Martha Bolton, 'Universals, Essences, and Abstract Entities', in Daniel Garber and Michael Ayers (eds), *The Cambridge History of Seventeenth-Century Philosophy, Volume One* (Cambridge, 2000), 178–211; and, more broadly, Robert Pasnau, *Metaphysical Themes 1274–1671* (Oxford, 2011).

<sup>13</sup> References to Shakespeare's poem taken from *The New Oxford Shakespeare: Critical Reference Edition*, ed. Gary Taylor, John Jowett et al. (Oxford, 2017); line-numbers given in parentheses.

dialectic of particular and universal towards its terminus in the aesthetic. By its ending, metaphysics has passed into the material, while that material is redeemed only in memory, through the impassioned but impotent sighing of a prayer. 'The Phoenix and Turtle' closes in the affinity between art and mourning, where the condition for poetry's autonomy is also its loss, and where its right to exist is a right to memorialize that loss, mournfully.

### ALLEGORY

'The Phoenix and Turtle' begins with a *fiat* which may not make anything happen. The opening stanza issues a summons that falls somewhere between demand, concession, and invitation:

Let the bird of lowdest lay,  
On the sole *Arabian* tree,  
Herald sad and trumpet be:  
To whose sound chaste wings obey.

(ll.1–4)

By the sound of it, these lines should be louder than they are. The bird is identified only by the loudness of its lay, so forceful that it becomes not just the herald but the trumpet too. It joins a raucous choir of birds announced over subsequent stanzas, from the 'shrieking harbinger' of the owl (l.5) to the 'death-deuning Swan' and his 'defunctive Musicke' (ll.14–15). Yet Barbara Everett is surely right that the tenor of these opening lines 'unmakes imperatives, the mood of power'.<sup>14</sup> Their speaker is not the bird itself, after all, but some other voice, the one that brings this poem into being. However loud the bird may be, if and when it sounds, its voice is invoked with an uncanny sense of calm. It is only muffled further by the poem's form. The four-line structure of its first 13 stanzas often tends to fall into a three-line unit from which the fourth line stands enigmatically apart. That can give those final lines an epigrammatic feel: 'Keepe the obsequie so strict' (l.12), 'But in them it were a wonder' (l.32), 'Either was the others mine' (l.36), 'Simple were so well compounded' (l.44). Here, the three-line arc of the stanza's first phrase, and the expectant colon at its end, seemingly anticipate some of some rationale for this summons. Instead, the fourth line preserves the pointed abstraction of the scene: through the metonymy that dissolves a flock of birds in a flurry of wings, before attaching the peculiar epithet of 'chaste'; but above all, through the verb. 'Obay' (l.4) could be indicative or imperative: these wings might naturally obey the herald's sound, or they might need some additional encouragement to do so. It may alternatively remain as a kind of conditional: let this bird be the herald, and only then will these wings obey. If it is hard to conceive how chaste wings might obey that sound, it is harder still to conceive how they might obey *to* it. The little glitch in the stanza's grammar slackens a transitive obedience into an indistinct and intransitive response, further unmaking its imperative, and in doing so, placing an awkward weight on an especially vulnerable moment in the poem's metre. The four-beat, seven-syllable pattern opens a pause between the last stress of one line and the first of the next. As a result, each line seems marked by an implicit diminuendo, each time growing quieter and slower before restarting in the following line. Rather than smoothing over that technical vulnerability, Shakespeare seems intent on exacerbating it, by routinely beginning his lines with the most unprepossessing of words. 'To whose sound' (l.4); 'To this troupe' (l.8); 'From this Session' (l.9): these monosyllables carry a prosodic charge they cannot bear, and are somehow thickened as a result. Even before its philosophical meditations on distance and space, then, the poem troubles the question of where it takes place. The prepositions, under the weight of the metre, seem to enfold within them some opaque relations of thought.

<sup>14</sup> Barbara Everett, 'Set upon a golden bough to sing: Shakespeare's debt to Sidney in "The Phoenix and Turtle"', *Times Literary Supplement*, 5107 (2001), 13–15 (p. 15).



Meanwhile, the ebbing urgency of this stanza's verbs brings a new grammatical shape into view. So wide is the space between 'Let' and 'be', the two terms of this *fiat*, that another construction emerges: not the giving of orders, but the positing of a hypothesis: *let x be y*. The stanza has the ring of a geometrical theorem, defining and constructing terms of interpretation that have not yet been set.<sup>15</sup> This is what makes it hard to know what, if anything, is taking place. Over its opening movement, 'The Phoenix and Turtle' introduces a catafalque of birds, and matches them with a corresponding set of ritual functions. But the form of that ritual wavers. The 'Session' (1.9) announced at the beginning of one stanza morphs, by its end, into an 'obsequie' (1.12), until the 'Requiem' (1.16) reframes it finally as a funeral. Yet unless the invitations of *Let* are accepted, none of these birds arrives, and none of their functions are performed. If one reading sees a procession of birds acting out a funeral, another would emphasize the birds on the one hand, and the funeral on the other, with only the direction of the poem's mysterious voice to read them together. That direction is more suggestive than instructive: not *x is y*, but *let x be y*. By the time that same grammar returns in the fourth stanza, what is standing for what is harder to say:

Let the Priest in Surples white,  
That defunctiue Musicke can,  
Be the death-deuining Swan,  
Lest the *Requiem* lacke his right.

(ll.13–16)

Instead of appointing the swan as priest, the poem posits priest as swan; instead of casting birds in a familiar ritual, a familiar ritual is wrenched out of shape, with only the whiteness of the surplice to establish a correspondence between bird and priest so heterogeneous it is positively surreal. Even the 'Requiem' momentarily comes alive, not as a ceremony with its rite, but a claimant with *his right*. Elsewhere in the poem, reversing predications has a similar shock-effect, most startlingly in the *Threnos*, in a line where the deadness of the birds is promoted, abstracted, and vivified: 'Death is now the *Phoenix* nest' (1.56). For all the interpreting the poem's nouns have provoked, its verbs are just as strange: whether in the archaism of 'can', the aetiolated imperatives like 'obay', or simply the kind of hypothetical positing involved in letting one thing be another.

This is the speculative grammar in which the poem's opening section unfolds. Rather than soldering two terms into identity, it sets them in motion, each defining and destabilizing the other. Shakespeare imports this mode of double speaking from allegory. In his landmark argument for reading 'The Phoenix and Turtle' as metaphysical poetry, James Bednarz situates it at the transition between two phases of literary production: on the one side, a tradition of allegory, stretching back through Edmund Spenser to medieval writing; on the other, the cool, tricky lyrics of John Donne. 'The Phoenix and Turtle', Bednarz writes, is 'an explicitly self-conscious literary work that reconfigures as metaphysical verse the kind of Spenserian allegory Chester employs'.<sup>16</sup> Yet sliding from allegorical to metaphysical poetry along the literary-historical timeline risks foreclosing allegory's claim to be the most metaphysical poetry of all. If 'The Phoenix and Turtle' is Shakespeare's metaphysical poem, it is one he constructed out of allegory's resources; and appreciating its metaphysics means appreciating the Spenserian elements of his practice. As Bednarz notes, that in turn means attending to the poem that takes up most of *Loves Martyr*, by which Shakespeare's experiment with allegory was mediated: 'Rosalins Complaint', by the

<sup>15</sup> For 'The Phoenix and Turtle' as part of a mathematical ferment in Shakespeare's thinking, see Edward Wilson-Lee, 'Shakespeare by Numbers: Mathematical Crisis in *Troilus and Cressida*', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 64 (2013), 449–72, esp. 467–70.

<sup>16</sup> Bednarz, *Truth of Love*, 187.

Welsh poet Robert Chester. 'Rosalins Complaint' describes itself on the title-page as '*Allegorically shadowing the truth of Loue, in the constant Fate of the Phoenix and Turtle*' (LM, A2<sup>r</sup>). Spenser's example looms large throughout: in its inset history of King Arthur, which picks up where Spenser left off in Book II of *The Faerie Queene*; but also in the way that episode of British history is enclosed in allegorical shadows. The love and death of the phoenix and turtle-dove is the overarching narrative of Chester's poem; but around it play a delirious medley of episodes, from an aerial tour of the wonders of the world, to catalogues of flora and fauna, to alphabetical and acrostic celebrations of phoenix and turtle. That eclecticism is perhaps part of allegory's strategy, a way of signalling the subordination of poetic narrative to some external locus of meaning.<sup>17</sup> In Chester's hands, though, allegorical polysemy may be just too multiple to form a unified hermeneutic vision. Characters are sporadically identified with abstractions, but seem unable to sustain them. One moment the turtle-dove is constancy, the next, liberal honour. The phoenix may not even be a phoenix at all: 'O stay me not, I am no *Phoenix* I', it insists, 'And if I be that bird, I am defaced' (C4<sup>v</sup>). Both change meaning as regularly as they change gender. Yet the poem remains insistent that its materials are there to be interpreted.

This paradox is restated insistently in a self-standing poem, 'To those of light beleefe', where Chester instructs his poem's readers:

You gentle fauourers of excelling *Muses*,  
 And gracers of all Learning and Desart,  
 You whose Conceit the deepest worke peruses,  
 Whose Iudgements still are gouerned by Art:  
     Reade gently what you reade, this next conceit  
     Fram'd of pure loue, abandoning deceit.

And you whose dull Imagination,  
 And blind conceited Error hath not knowne,  
 Of Herbes and Trees true nomination,  
 But thinke them fabulous that shall be showne:  
     Learne more, search much, and surely you shall find,  
     Plaine honest Truth and Knowledge comes behind.

(LM, C4<sup>f</sup>)

Playing on that keyword of allegory, 'conceit'—perhaps borrowed from Spenser's letter to Raleigh—Chester praises readers who identify his poem as a 'conceit | Fram'd of pure loue', and muster the corresponding 'Conceit' while perusing it. By contrast, he censures those whose 'blind conceited Error' blocks them from the 'Plaine honest Truth and Knowledge' behind the poem's surface. As the reception of *Loves Martyr*, and its fervid biographical overinterpretation, have proved, distinguishing between one kind of 'conceit' and another is far from self-evident. Rather than signalling Chester's incompetence, however, this might reveal something about writing allegory after Spenser. Allegory seems to invest a poem with the hope of perfect comprehensibility, through which it might be conceived as true or good and not just as beautiful. Yet the darkness of its conceit suggests this comprehensibility is, if not absent, then certainly hidden. In the absence of some conceptual schema by which the poem's details could be ordered, but without permission to enjoy those details free from the concept's demands, allegory is legible only through the piecemeal work of speculation. Only by searching much and learning more

<sup>17</sup> See Gordon Teskey, *Allegory and Violence* (Ithaca, NY, 1996), 5: 'An allegory is an incoherent narrative...that makes us interpret throughout'.

can the poem's readers hope to light on its allegorical moments: the mediations of universal and particular, local and provisional, rather than either's predominance.<sup>18</sup>

If Shakespeare took anything from Chester, it was allegory's capacity to provoke this kind of thinking. The result, in 'The Phoenix and Turtle', is a puzzle: a scene that unfolds according to some cryptic set of norms; a voice that relates those norms, without explaining or performing them; a cast of characters whose significance is uncertain; and a letting-be which holds those characters in a sort of double vision. 'As a communal ritual of consolation full of shared meanings', writes Anita Gilman Sherman, 'the poem seems to instantiate the reverse of a private language and to undo its possibility. Yet, it verges on the unintelligible by offering us the conundrum of a private language on a social scale.'<sup>19</sup> In simultaneously urging collective sense-making and singular incomprehensibility like this, this poem situates itself at the juncture between the universal and particular. That is the site of allegory, and its traffic between its materials and their meaning. But it is also the site of judgement, which from Aristotle onwards had been tasked with relating sensible particulars to intelligible universals.<sup>20</sup> It is this tradition Kant continues, in his third *Critique*, in defining judgement as 'the ability to think the particular as contained under the universal': the rule, the principle, the law.<sup>21</sup> Whether moving from universal to particular, or vice versa, judgement involves a process Kant calls *Beurteilung*, or 'estimating'. That process is most energetic in the experience of beauty, where judgement tries and fails to file the stuff of appearance under conceptual headings: lingering over the sensuous particular at hand, without giving up the search for some concept, some universal by which it might be known. In a sense, then, allegory might be seen as an allegory for aesthetic judgement itself. The feverish interpretation required of its readers is a model for the cognitive whirring Kant describes: learning more, searching more, scanning the world in hope of finding recognition. The artwork encourages us to look for its presiding norms, the standards by which we might call it beautiful and know what we mean; yet it escapes subsumption under the universals of understanding (the true) or reason (the good). Although the interpretations it elicits take the form of statements about the work itself, they prove unable to substantiate their claim to cognition, but equally unable to exchange that claim for the comfort of indifferent liking.

The tension between universal and particular ran through aesthetics long before Kant. For Aquinas, Maura Nolan has shown, beauty held a universal scope as a metaphysical transcendental while retaining an irreducibly particular moment in its relation to subjective cognition.<sup>22</sup> That medieval legacy only clarifies the closeness of aesthetics to metaphysics. The dilemma of particular and universal, we have seen, is one they share. Not just a problem, perhaps *the* problem, on which metaphysics works since Aristotle, it is a problem for metaphysics itself, because it throws into doubt the spectrum of thinking that is its condition of possibility. Aristotle establishes that spectrum at the opening of the *Metaphysics*, which begins in the love of knowledge: 'all people by nature desire to know' (*Met*, 980a1). That desire moves upwards from experience (*empeira*) to art (*technē*) to knowledge (*epistēmē*), and from particulars to universals, until, with the first philosophy known afterwards as metaphysics, thinking reaches the first causes of everything that exists. Metaphysical enquiry thus involves an ascent from the particulars, even if Aristotle resists the hypostasis of otherworldly principles he attributes to Plato. It is premised on human

<sup>18</sup> This depiction of allegory is indebted to Namratha Rao, 'Ground-plots of Invention: Poetics of the Material and Difficult Thinking in *The Faerie Queene*', *ELR*, 53 (2023), 218–49; and Rao, 'The Virtues of Mediation: Milton's Ludlow *Maske*', forthcoming in *RES*. I am grateful to Dr Rao for sharing and discussing her work with me.

<sup>19</sup> Anita Gilman Sherman, 'Fantasies of Private Language in "The Phoenix and Turtle" and "The Ecstasy"', in Judith H. Anderson and Jennifer C. Vaughan (eds), *Shakespeare and Donne: Generic Hybrids and the Cultural Imaginary* (New York, NY, 2013), 169–84 (p. 177).

<sup>20</sup> See Kevin Curran, 'Introduction', in Kevin Curran (ed.), *Shakespeare and Judgment* (Edinburgh, 2017), 1–18.

<sup>21</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, tr. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis, IN, 1987), 18.

<sup>22</sup> Maura Nolan, 'Aesthetics', in Marion Turner (ed.), *A Handbook of Middle English Studies* (Chichester, 2013), 223–38.



cognition as allowing that ascent by progressing through a series of homogeneous moments, from experience to knowledge, whose continuity and hierarchy can make things cohere. Crucially, there is an affinity here with allegory. The fourfold allegorical method developed by Origen and later Christian thinkers, Angus Fletcher has argued, corresponds to an Aristotelian search for the four causes; with this method, readers of allegory follow the path of metaphysics, asking after the essence and meaning of what they read, and stopping only at the universal in which the conceit is illuminated.<sup>23</sup> For Fletcher, as for many theorists of allegory, this spiriting of particulars into universals taints metaphysics and allegory alike with an ideological guilt. Yet what Shakespeare presents in 'The Phoenix and Turtle' is an alternative possibility latent in allegorical technique. As the following part will argue, the poem shows the recursions of thought from universality as it is driven back to its bodies. But these recursions release an energy that rises above particulars even as it immerses itself in them, to find what, speaking of allegory, Namratha Rao has called 'a moving concept, one that is both critical and speculative.'<sup>24</sup> The charting of that dialectic, in both its moments, is what makes Shakespeare's poem metaphysical. Metaphysics' desire to know may be nothing but wishful thinking, or, worse, the impulse towards domination. But it also makes metaphysics a thinking which can divulge its own innermost wishes.

### METAPHYSICS

'The Phoenix and Turtle' stages a 'Session' that might pass judgement on the phoenix and turtle, and a 'Requiem' that might set them to rest. But even assuming the ritual can begin—as it seems, in the poem's second movement, to do—it cannot reconcile the particular and universal dimensions of its central figures.

Here the Antheme doth commence,  
Love and Constancie is dead,  
*Phoenix* and the *Turtle* fled,  
In a mutuall flame from hence.

(ll.21–4)

As this new voice enters, it sounds as though the allegory's conceit is spoken out loud. 'Love' and 'Constancie' reveal themselves as the proper essences of phoenix and turtle; with their demise, the concepts they signified and instantiated are dead. Nonetheless, mapping one pair onto another already oversimplifies the internal fusion of love and constancy, for which only a singular verb, 'is', is required. Meanwhile, the distinction of the stanza's internal rhyme is as important as its identification: if love and constancy are 'dead', here, in this anthem, the phoenix and turtle may have 'fled', still living somewhere 'hence'. This is the story of the philosophical concepts that characterize the second part of Shakespeare's poem. Those concepts are brought in to determine what this love between phoenix and turtle might mean; but no sooner do they enter than they are denatured by that love's resistance to determination. Introduced as the poem's metaphysical causes, they end up as its materials. So, by the following stanza, 'Love and Constancie' has been further reduced, such that now, love alone is the presiding conceit:

So they loued as loue in twaine,  
Had the essence but in one,  
Two distincts, Diuision none,  
Number there in loue was slaine.

<sup>23</sup> Angus J. S. Fletcher, 'Allegory without Ideas', *boundary 2*, 33 (2006), 77–98.

<sup>24</sup> Rao, 'Ground-plots of Invention', 221.

Hearts remote, yet not asunder;  
 Distance and no space was seene,  
 Twixt this *Turtle* and his *Queene*;  
 But in them it were a wonder.

(ll.25–32)

These stanzas touch on the oldest question of metaphysics—that is, in Aristotle’s description, the question of being *qua* being; and their answer is somewhat akin to his. What makes something the thing it is, for Aristotle, is its *essence*: neither the form-matter compound of the concrete object, nor the universal form over and above matter, but the universal actualized and bodied forth by the particular. Correspondingly, in Shakespeare’s poem, the two lovers are materially independent but ontologically identical. They may still be ‘in twaine’, but their true being, the essence, is ‘in one’; and that essence is one only by splitting itself into two. That metaphysical partition is shored up as the stanzas continue. The phoenix and turtle, we learn, simultaneously fulfil and fail the scholastic criteria of what it is to be one thing, as *in se indivisum*, undivided in themselves, and simultaneously *ab aliis divisum*, distinct from each other. Their hearts are remote, but not asunder, because their ontological sameness coincides with their accidental differences of distance.

The technical subtlety of these arguments has sometimes reminded readers of attempts to explain how the Trinity’s three persons might share one indivisible substance. J. V. Cunningham even landed on the idea of the Trinity as the ‘clue’ to reading Shakespeare’s poem, the system of norms through which ‘all the difficulties of the expository part of the poem are resolved’.<sup>25</sup> As a result, these lines are often taken as the key to the poem’s metaphysics, or theology, or political theology. Yet they feel just as invested in rearticulating the problem itself, through ever finer degrees of extremity, as in propounding a solution. This would bring them closer to the early modern culture of paradox, in which the Trinity itself could feature alongside other ‘involved aenigmas and riddles’ to unsettle received opinion.<sup>26</sup> The paradox of the final line above, however, lies in the refusal of paradox’s customary wonder: while in other cases, ‘it were a wonder’, here, the poem claims, it is not. Shakespeare’s stanzas hold the project of metaphysical system together with its dialectical recoil, equally refusing the confidence of doctrine and the paradox’s contrarian flair. This strange combination expresses itself in the poem’s mode of arguing: precise, exacting, but eerily unmoved. These stanzas draw on scholastic concepts and methods, even gently parodying the scholastic tic of distinction by distinguishing distinction itself from division. All the same, they feel simultaneously fragmentary and tranquil. They are more like notes towards a poem; not pushing home an argument, or settling on its terms, but trying again and again to describe the instance of love. For all its philosophical nouns, the verbs in the poem’s second part are in short supply. Strung together with the slightest of connectives, often just a comma, the logical connections remain frustratingly vague. And the arresting force of the line-break stops thought before it can get going. The effect is a sort of philosophical parallax, whose readers must first reconstruct, then reconcile, multiple framings of the phoenix and turtle, on the basis of frustratingly abstruse suggestions. But it also serves to animate the concepts themselves. Without the grammatical nexus that would put them to use, words like ‘Diuision’, ‘Number’, and ‘Distance’—sporadically capitalized as they are—transform from concepts into characters: substances in their own right, players in this philosophical drama.

<sup>25</sup> J. V. Cunningham, “‘Essence’ and the *Phoenix and Turtle*,” *ELH*, 19 (1952), 265–76 (p. 273).

<sup>26</sup> Thomas Browne, ‘Religio Medici’, in Kevin Killeen (ed.), *Selected Writings* (Oxford, 2014), 12; see also Rosalie Colie, *Paradoxia Epidemica: The Renaissance Tradition of Paradox* (Princeton, NJ, 1966); and Peter G. Platt, *Shakespeare and the Culture of Paradox* (Farnham, 2009). I am grateful to one of RES’s readers for suggesting this direction.

So it is that metaphysics opens onto allegory once again; and its concepts, technically acute but logically underdetermined, acquire a contradictory prominence. On the one hand, they are hypostatized as universals over and against their particular uses. In absorbing the energies of philosophical argumentation into themselves, they establish themselves as a metaphysical jargon. On the other hand, being relieved of their stricter philosophical functioning also lets them take on an unexpected life of their own. Number cannot count, but can be 'slaine' (l.28); and it can only be slain because it can no longer count. Distance, meanwhile—the spatial relation between visible entities—becomes a visible entity itself. Congelations of thinking, these concepts seem both to arrogate thought to themselves, as though it radiated out of them, and simultaneously to make thinking material. Shakespeare develops both tendencies at one stroke as his poem moves from increasingly animate conceptualization towards full-fledged personification:

Propertie was thus appalled,  
That the selfe was not the same:  
Single Natures double name,  
Neither two nor one was called.

(ll.37–40)

For Aristotle, property (*idion*) is 'that which does not show the essence of a thing, but belongs to it alone, and is predicated convertibly of it'.<sup>27</sup> As an attribute which denotes the essential character of something, it is a way of defining and thus knowing things. With the love of phoenix and turtle, though, that movement towards knowledge has stalled. No longer does it seem possible to determine the relations between subject and predicate in philosophical propositions; the self-same thing, once it emanates from itself, is no longer the same. The resulting tremor at once makes 'Propertie' and makes it appalled; and in being appalled into being, it contravenes its own law. On an Aristotelian account, properties depend on substances; here, property becomes itself a substance. Yet the substance conferred by personification is instantly revoked. 'Propertie'—one of what would be dubbed the *quinque voces* of predicable—becomes a speaking *persona* only to be rendered speechless, appalled by what it sees, and dumbfounded at what to call it: single or double, two, one, or neither.<sup>28</sup>

When the next abstraction appears on the scene, it is already afflicted by the curse of property:

Reason in it selfe confounded,  
Saw Diuision grow together,  
To themselues yet either neither,  
Simple were so well compounded.

That it cried, how true a twaine,  
Seemeth this concordant one,  
Loue hath Reason, Reason none,  
If what parts, can so remaine.

(ll.41–8)

<sup>27</sup> Aristotle, 'Topics', in Hugh Tredennick and E. S. Forster (eds), *Posterior Analytics; Topica* (Cambridge, MA, 1960), A2 (102a19–20); further references from this edition given in my translations. See also Jonathan Barnes, 'Property in Aristotle's Topics', *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie*, 52 (1970), 136–55.

<sup>28</sup> Beyond its philosophical significance, property was of course undergoing a more tangible crisis, marked by developments in property law, the creeping priority of movable over immovable forms of property, and the abstraction of wealth from its material bearers, all part of the development of capital. That crisis is intertwined with the crisis of transmission described below, not least inasmuch as the distinction between movables and immovables depends on how they can be alienated (inherited, given, sold, etc.). See Martha C. Howell, 'The Language of Property in Early Modern Europe', in Henry S. Turner (ed.), *The Culture of Capital: Property, Cities, and Knowledge in Early Modern Europe* (London, 2002), 17–25.

At the sight of division growing together, reason seems to divide in on itself, emerging as Reason 'in it selfe confounded'. The shock is enough to turn one stanza into two, as, in a formal surprise, the poem runs over the break between them. This is almost the only time when its otherwise self-certain form seems disconcerted. Its unruffled manner of proceeding is no longer adequate to the wonder it describes, it seems, and a new voice emerges, an altogether new sound: the startling cry of an abstraction not given to crying. And in that moment, Shakespeare's experiments with personification reveal a fresh metaphysical significance. For many theorists of allegory, personifications are the worst sort of metaphysics, reducing bodies into concepts without remainder.<sup>29</sup> Here, Reason is the remainder. Its cry is the admission of its failure; unable to stick to the theoretical position of seeing, it is forced to speak for itself. Rather than subsuming the object into the concept, then, this personification drives the concept to reveal itself as object. It is as though we suddenly glimpse the transcendental conditions of the social formation that make the phoenix and turtle in some sense unthinkable. Their love sends a shudder through reason that betrays the subjective investments it had intended to sublimate. Reason recognizes the passion in what it witnesses, and simultaneously acknowledges the passion within itself as well: a dialectic of love and reason which undoes their division without drawing them into a lasting concord. And with the challenge of those improper parts ringing in its ears, Reason makes a parting gesture of its own. Its new-found voice is put to work in making 'this *Threne*, | To the *Phoenix* and the *Doue*' (ll.49–50)—moving the poem, in effect, from metaphysics to poetry.

What, then, is the poem saying about the metaphysics it deploys? For Cunningham, its scholastic inflections reach out to Trinitarian theology as its determining intellectual and linguistic context—the metaphysical framework which can 'sanction' its thinking.<sup>30</sup> Yet the unsparing clarity of his reading leaves it unclear why, if the Trinity's logic is so appropriate for the phoenix and turtle, Property and Reason should be so put out. For those who read the poem in light of reason's collapse, by contrast, these ventures into scholasticism are exclusively critical. In a recent monograph on *Loves Martyr*, Don Rodrigues thus reads Shakespeare's poem as a wholesale rejection of metaphysical reason from the standpoint of embodied experience. Speaking for the body captured by 'externally imposed notions of the rational', Rodrigues gives voice to the poem itself, which 'seems to say, Keep your Reason off my body, because it cannot begin to understand me.'<sup>31</sup> My reading of the poem has sympathy with both sides of this argument, but departs from both. Installing metaphysics as the presiding force of 'The Phoenix and Turtle' would deny the poem's capacity to think for itself, as though it remained dependent on the heteronomous authority of the understanding for its truth-claims. But establishing an antagonistic dualism between metaphysics and poetry, reason and the body, opens itself to the same charges. In this case, the body becomes some transcendent other—seemingly free from thought's entanglements, but surreptitiously repeating its distortion, by abandoning its native corporeality and handing itself over for theoretical manipulation. The body is not strong enough to resist the concept's voracious expansion, for the simple reason that 'body' is itself a concept.<sup>32</sup> For this reason, too, the dialectic of universal and particular cannot be resolved by asserting the latter against the former. The particular is a double name, no sooner uttered than it is brought within the ambit of cognition. There is a somatic resistance to the universal in Shakespeare's poem; but finding it requires subjecting the universal to intense scrutiny on its own terms. For if the particular—the body, the material, the non-conceptual—is tacitly mediated by the concept, then the opposite is

<sup>29</sup> See Teskey, *Allegory and Violence*, 1–31; and Fredric Jameson, *Allegory and Ideology* (London, 2019). For Shakespeare's use of personification, see Helen Cooper, 'The Afterlife of Personification', in Ruth Morse, Helen Cooper, and Peter Holland (eds), *Medieval Shakespeares: Past and Presents* (Cambridge, 2013), 98–116.

<sup>30</sup> Cunningham, "Essence", 273.

<sup>31</sup> Don Rodrigues, *Shakespeare's Queer Analytics: Distant Reading and Collaborative Intimacy in 'Love's Martyr'* (London, 2022), 105, 123.

<sup>32</sup> This also distinguishes my reading from other accounts—especially Michael Witmore's, *Shakespearean Metaphysics* (London, 2008)—which take the bodies onstage as the terms by which Shakespeare articulates a metaphysics of immanence.

also true. Within concepts themselves there is a disavowed residue of the non-conceptual; and it is at the furthest extreme of the concept that this residue manifests itself, in the shudder with which it touches on the limits of its comprehensive powers.

'The Phoenix and Turtle' is thus a critique of metaphysical reason, subjective and objective genitive. That critique remains immanent: Reason, after all, is 'in it self confounded' (l.41). The pathos of its cry testifies to its internal contradictions, to the alienated humanity buried within its workings, and chastens its own tendency to universalize itself over and above particulars as their truth and their fate. Its recoil thus makes space for a new dispensation of reason, in which love, no less than reason itself, might have a role to play. For this reason, metaphysics is at once the target of the poem's critique and its method. As the science that takes concepts for its objects, it may declare itself emphatically remote from material concerns, yet it is never quite sundered from them, thanks to the material sedimented within the concept itself. By working concepts to the point of collapse, metaphysics promises to reveal more about the object—an object truly outside the closed circuit of thought—than any particular object invoked from well within that circuit. And it gives substance to that collapse by grasping it with all the sophistication necessary to establish it, not as a subjective failing of any thinker, but as an objective default of thinking itself. This is the reason for the extraordinary stringency of Shakespeare's voice throughout the poem, its resolute retreat from intimacy, against which Reason's cry is all the more startling. By keeping its distance from the objective world, metaphysics feels for the space from which the object has been lost: the object has departed, the space remains. All its attempts to rationalize the phoenix and turtle from the outside have succeeded only in exposing the compromising remnant of materiality that reason would repress. In the act, reason comes face-to-face with itself as Reason, confronted with its own semblance, and compelled to assume a new role in the domain of artistic seeming: as '*Chorus to their Tragique Scene*' (l.52). The only way left for metaphysics is to follow through on that materialist turn, not by returning to the body, but by mourning its loss. And with that, the poem moves into its *Threnos*, and metaphysics passes over into aesthetics.

### AESTHETICS

The '*Threnos*' presents its own metaphysical conundrum. Given its own new title, at the beginning of a new page, it is uncertain whether it is part of the same poem or a new poem altogether. The double name seems peculiarly fitting for the single natures of 'The Phoenix and Turtle.' For all the poem's metaphysical investigations into ones and twos, the '*Threnos*' also clarifies its interest in the threeness they might produce: from the Trinitarian complexion of its metaphysics, to the rhymed tercets into which it moves, to the possibility of some third term left over from the phoenix and turtle's mutual flame. Yet this turn of the dialectic is, above all, a song of mourning:

Beautie, Truth, and Raritie,  
Grace in all simplicitie,  
Here enclosde, in cinders lie.

Death is now the *Phoenix* nest,  
And the *Turtles* loyall brest,  
To eternitie doth rest.

(ll.53–8)

After the hymn-like invocation of metaphysical transcendentals, the grubbiness to which they have been reduced comes as a cruel joke. For all its simplicity, Grace lies in cinders; Truth lies; and Beauty cannot communicate itself beyond the urn's enclosure. The poem ends on a crisis of reproduction, where the prospect of continuing is itself rendered doubtful. This, of course, is the question posed by the emblem at the heart of *Loves Martyr*, the phoenix whose meaning is at



once the continuity between old and new and the precariousness of that transition. Only in the broadest terms can that crisis be mapped onto a corresponding historical moment. The impending eclipse of Elizabeth the ‘mortal Moone’, the extinction of the Tudor line, even the confusion over the social and religious rituals best suited for smoothing over such a transition: all these might inflect the poem, but none of them are determining.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, the poem’s sense of crisis is defined by its loss of moorings from any historical or philosophical system of reference—a loss one might outrageously refer to as the feeling of modernity. Without such moorings, poetry is stranded between the particular and the universal; no longer reconciling them, as Aristotle had suggested, but marking the failure of their reconciliation.<sup>34</sup> The fable of the phoenix and turtle tests the conditions of poetry’s remaining; and the failure of its allegory becomes an allegory of its own failure.

In Chester’s ‘Rosalins Complaint’, the survival of the phoenix is never quite guaranteed. The thought that some ‘more perfect creature’ might emerge from its partnership with the turtle, entertained by the pelican who witnesses their death, remains an unanswered question. Marston uses his contribution in *Loves Martyr* to give an emphatically affirmative answer, and to refute Shakespeare’s more melancholy interpretation. Indeed, even before the regeneration of an offspring he calls ‘*Metaphisicall*’, he has already tried to place Shakespeare at the scene of the crime by praising his ‘mouing *Epicedium*’—the name for a poem recited in the presence of the body.<sup>35</sup> Shakespeare presents, not the body, but its absence; and he answers the question of Chester’s pelican in the negative:

Leaving no posteritie,  
Twas not their infirmitie,  
It was married Chastitie.

(ll.59–61)

The union of phoenix and turtle is so chaste that it admits no third, no *tertium quid*, by which single nature and double name might be harmonized. The stanza presents itself as an apology and an explanation, but the inversions of its syntax reveal an unmistakable grief. It thus marks a turn towards a peculiarly mournful sense of the aesthetic. Shakespeare had discovered this compact of beauty and grief in the first batch of his *Sonnets*, and their recognition, even in the exhortation to reproduce, of a beauty distinguished in being unreproducible. Beauty is beautiful, increasingly, because it cannot be passed down: its evanescence only renders it more beguiling.<sup>36</sup> So too, in the opening stanzas of this *Threnos*, Beauty, like its fellow transcendentals, is visible only in retrospect, unthinkable except through the cinders it has become. Although it reaches out to a perhaps unconsummated rite, ‘The Phoenix and Turtle’ pays its respects in the perfect tense, with a ‘defunctive Musicke’ it attributes to the death-divining swan (l.14).

This, at least, is the reading favoured by those critics James Bednarz calls the ‘pessimists’. The alternative viewpoint fixes on the ‘bird of lowdest lay’, whose perch on the ‘sole *Arabian tree*’ may identify it as the resurrected phoenix itself (ll.1–2). Either the phoenix dies before the poem begins, it seems, or it begins the entire poem. There is nothing to tell between the two; but whatever hints the poem may drop at its start cannot revoke the mood of sadness enfolding its end.

<sup>33</sup> See Sonnet 107, l.5: ‘The mortall Moone hath her eclipse indur’d e’; for the line’s allusion to Elizabeth I’s death, see Shakespeare, *The Sonnets and A Lover’s Complaint*, ed. John Kerrigan (London, 1999), 313–19 n. Marie Axton read *Loves Martyr* as an allegory for the succession, but, as we have seen, the mechanics of allegory are themselves troubled in this poem: Axton, *The Queen’s Two Bodies: Drama and the Elizabethan Succession* (London, 1977), 116–30.

<sup>34</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, 145b1–10: *De Arte Poetica Liber*, ed. Rudolf Kassel (Oxford, 1965).

<sup>35</sup> The distinction between *epicedium* (spoken in the presence of the body), *epitaphium recens* (for a recently buried body), and *epitaphium anniversarium* (yearly commemoration of the dead) was made by Julius Caesar Scaliger in his *Poetices* (1561). See Andrea Brady, *English Funerary Elegy in the Seventeenth Century: Laws in Mourning* (Basingstoke, 2006), 21.

<sup>36</sup> ‘... aber diese Kurzlebigkeit fügt zu ihren Reizen einen neuen hinzu’: Sigmund Freud, ‘On Transience’, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, tr. James Strachey (London, 1957), 14.306.

There are nonetheless some survivors in this tragic scene: the birds who make up the allegorical procession, the abstractions who people its central passage, and Reason, who—as much as Shakespeare—is the author of this ‘*Threne*’ (l.49). For all that phoenix and turtle leave no posterity, Reason asserts itself as a third term in their union. Even after acknowledging its own internal contradictions, and turning to poetry for their resolution, it reaffirms its hold over respectable cognition as the privileged voice of testimony. Reason implicitly presents itself as the only one who can speak of these dead birds, as the only identifiable voice in their funeral. As the irresolution of the poem’s ‘*Session*’ shows (l.9), the death of the phoenix and turtle does not found some new law to replace confounded reason—whether based on the particular, or the body, or the material beyond reason’s reach. Instead, it bequeaths a new sense of lawlessness, the lack of a norm by which these beings could be subsumed into a cycle of transmission. Poetry cannot be the counterweight to metaphysics, because it too is a conceptual art: Reason reminds us of that fact, in speaking on both sides of the page, recouping in the ‘*Threnos*’ what it relinquished earlier in the poem. Poetry’s sole advantage is as the place where thought can recall its own incapacities. Perhaps this is why it is so difficult to tell what happens at the end of the ‘*The Phoenix and Turtle*’, whether death or resurrection. Poetry cannot avouch a survival reason has cast into doubt. It cannot revive or replace the metaphysical principles whose death it relates, or preserve what has been lost. All it can do is show through its grief the loss it has incurred, before reason’s divisions grow together again and the wound is healed.

Shakespeare’s poem is thus an elegy that hints at poetry’s conceptual affinity with the elegiac. In the act, it raises the possibility that it itself might be the *tertium quid* that outlasts the phoenix and turtle. Funeral elegy always skirts the risk of becoming the main event like this: of taking itself as its principal object, and hence of losing the lost one twice over. That risk is thrilling, insofar as it captures the ambivalence of these poetic speakers, their desire to reassert their survival against the threat of falling, like the dead, into silence. The exuberance of Milton’s ‘*Lycidas*’ or Donne’s *Anniversaries* only manifest in exaggerated form the genre’s flair for self-absorption.<sup>37</sup> The tendency of elegies to return their reflections on themselves, to become poems about poems and not about loss, is one to which elegiac poets are (so to speak) alive. For Lynn Enterline, the emergence of poetry out of loss in ‘*The Phoenix and Turtle*’ comes as such an antidote, if not for the mourners, then at least for the readers. ‘Shakespeare’, she argues, ‘turns a poem of death into one that makes large claims for his own verbal power.’<sup>38</sup> But one could read the transformation the other way round, too, as returning those displays of verbal power to the scene of death. If the poem becomes a well-wrought urn, the question is: for whom does it mourn? The experience of poetry as poetry, with its own nascent autonomy as a discourse, is bound up with the memory of what it has had to forgo: the capacity for speaking truth. This is the phenomenon J. M. Bernstein calls ‘aesthetic alienation’, where the very experience of the aesthetic as aesthetic—of beauty as beauty, and not truth—is its emancipation and its defeat.<sup>39</sup> Poetry’s autonomy is won only through the introjection of loss; and art is art because it broods on that loss, refusing to forget it, and refashioning it as its own innermost theme. That complex of freedom and defeat lingers around the final stanzas of ‘*The Phoenix and Turtle*’, which are remarkable for mystifying the objects of its elegy: not just in refusing to declare who this is all for, but for actively deflating the dignity of these ‘dead Birds’, their death relayed in flat, curt terms (l.67). The thought that

<sup>37</sup> For early modern elegy, see Brady, *English Funerary Elegy*; and G. W. Pigman, III, *Grief and English Renaissance Elegy* (Cambridge, 1985), esp. 52–67.

<sup>38</sup> Lynn Enterline, ‘The Phoenix and Turtle’, *Renaissance Elegies, and the Language of Grief*, in Patrick Cheney, Andrew Hadfield, and Garrett A. Sullivan Jr (eds), *Early Modern English Poetry: A Critical Companion* (New York, NY, 2007), 147–59 (p. 157).

<sup>39</sup> J. M. Bernstein, *The Fate of Art: Aesthetic Alienation from Kant to Derrida and Adorno* (Cambridge, 1992); see also Gregg M. Horowitz, *Sustaining Loss: Art and Mournful Life* (Stanford, CA, 2001). For the resonance of Bernstein’s account with early modern poetics, see Mark Robson, ‘Defending Poetry, or, is There an Early Modern Aesthetic?’, in John J. Joughin and Simon Malpas (eds), *The New Aestheticism* (Manchester, 2003), 119–30.

a new world could be built on their terms is risible. Yet in making them mournable, the poem confronts the world they leave behind with the claim they continue to uphold, superseded but unforgotten.

The predilection of metaphysical poems for valedictions and departures is from this perspective more than coincidence. It suggests their sensitivity to the contest between universal and particular, and the reason the latter might unpredictably accrue—if what parts can so remain. Beauty is, for Shakespeare, a thing of the past. But (in the other half of Hegel's dictum) it *remains* a thing of the past. That remaining is the condition of the artwork's memorial function, the claims we could not know, the rites we could not celebrate: the loss of a world that is gone for good and yet unmourned. And the poem is that mourning:

Truth may seeme, but cannot be,  
 Beautie bragge, but tis not she,  
 Truth and Beautie buried be.

(ll.62–4)

The poem does not profess to preserve what it remembers; in the words of earlier lines, it cannot reconstitute *here* what has escaped *from hence* (ll.21–4). Yet it preserves the negative space of the object in the shudder of pleasure and loss it provokes, not in reality, but in seeming. This leaves it at odds with history, even literary history. The break marked by 'The Phoenix and Turtle' is not between two styles of poetry, allegorical and metaphysical, but between empirical reality and the unacknowledged right of the aesthetic. For, as Christopher Pye observes, the aesthetic is in Kant's rendering 'a category definitionally out of sync with itself and with its articulation as a cognizable category'.<sup>40</sup> It claims a universality that is not the universality of cognition, and invites a collective assent it cannot empirically verify. Aesthetics thus becomes, in Bernstein's words, a kind of memorial.<sup>41</sup> For this reason, inserting 'The Phoenix and Turtle' into literary history fails to respect the protest it lodges against historical time in the name of the dead—a protest made in the name of history itself. The poem is historical in remembering what has dropped out of cognition: the body in pain, the object of loss. That might lead us towards a different understanding of literary history. Rather than being accorded its own independence, or tagged to some basic but extraneous historical process, literary history can be understood as a continual restaging of that loss, the testing of possible responses to a disturbance whose tragic scene Shakespeare restages here.

That staging is performed for an unexpected audience, those who 'are either true or faire' (l.66). That it is still possible to be true or faire, in a poem which announces the mortification of Truth and Beauty, should come as a surprise. What, then, do the true and fair inherit from the ruination of Beauty, Truth, and Rarity? Not the concepts themselves, nor the objects that challenged them, but the memory of the disturbance between the two. 'The Phoenix and Turtle' is metaphysical above all in attesting to the antagonism between universal and particular without presuming it can be reconciled in either's favour. The poem ends with such a testimony:

To this vrne let those reparaie,  
 That are either true or faire,  
 For these dead Birds, sigh a prayer.

(ll.65–7)

<sup>40</sup> Christopher Pye, *The Storm at Sea: Political Aesthetics in the Time of Shakespeare* (New York, NY, 2015), 14.

<sup>41</sup> Bernstein, *Fate of Art*, 17–65.

From the loudest lay to the sighing of a prayer—so close to singing, but so much quieter—the poem has dissipated into less and less forceful expressions. Its final stanza consecrates a site of mourning that threatens to engulf the poem itself, freezing it into the silence of the urn, or letting it waft into sighs. If this lends it an air of pessimism, it would nonetheless be wrong to read it as resignation. The tomb of the phoenix and turtle invites and demands its readers' attention, and offers itself up as a new place of gathering. If it cannot reinstate a metaphysics that has collapsed, it can at least remember the flash of recognition between metaphysics and poetry, where reason's cry was given form as a *Threnos*. Its mourning may not become a law, but it shows how the seeming of the artwork intimates a lawfulness beyond law's reach. The critique of reason it has elucidated hints, in this final invitation, at a corresponding ethical imperative: to love the transience of things. That entails a commitment to transient things—things that would otherwise find themselves buried under the universal or consigned to mere particularity. But it also entails a commitment to things *as* transient, as mutable, whatever permanence the concept and its essence would bestow. At this present moment, the personification of Property continues to flourish in the noxious hypostasis of the corporation, and the irrationality of reason in its disregard for material life flaunts itself without fear of check.<sup>42</sup> For all this, Shakespeare's metaphysical poem upholds the claims of the departed, claims that might someday be honoured: in solidarity with the lost, through the project of collective repair.

*University of St Andrews, UK*

<sup>42</sup> See Henry S. Turner, 'Corporate Persons, Between Law and Literature', in Lorna Hutson (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of English Law and Literature, 1500–1700* (Oxford, 2017), 467–84.