

Literalising Metaphor in the Poetry of Robert Southwell[★]

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Foreseeing the martyr's palm even as early as his novitiate, Robert Southwell lived a life meditating on his end.¹ Pierre Janelle's claim that Southwell sought to make 'his execution a work of art of supreme beauty',² has long resonated with critics.³ He saw that Southwell's corpus was a kind of anticipatory hagiography. Subsequent readers have found that it was not just his writings which transformed his death but his death which transformed his writings. For Sophie Read, Southwell's martyrdom is 'the truth that guarantees the sign': like grace at work in a sacrament, it charges the figurative expressions of his verse with underlying power and reality.⁴ Despite critical agreement that Southwell's tropes point towards the historical moment of his death, I argue that scholars have missed a significant aspect of his poetics which makes non-fictional reality immanent in figurative language. I speak of the process of 'literalising' metaphors: reversing their usual structure, such that the vehicle rather than the tenor is the centre of attention.⁵ In this article, I claim that some of Southwell's best-known poems hinge on this distinctive trope. The technique is all the more affecting because it prefigures his own death for the faith. To die on the scaffold was the ultimate 'literalising' of metaphor, uniting and fulfilling the figurative roles he had written for himself in a real, extra-textual, act.

As Alison Shell has emphasised, the open persecution of Catholics in England from the Reformation up until the nineteenth century has diminished their

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¹ Robert Southwell, *Spiritual Exercises and Devotions*, (ed.) J. M. de Buck, trans. by P. E. Hallett (London, 1931), 99.

² Pierre Janelle, *Robert Southwell, the Writer: A Study in Religious Inspiration* (New York: P.P. Appel, 1971), 156.

³ F. W. Brownlow, *Robert Southwell* (New York: Twayne, 1996), 133; Anne Sweeney, *Robert Southwell: Snow in Arcadia: Redrawing the English Lyric Landscape, 1586–1595* (Manchester University Press, 2006), 277; Sophie Read, *The Eucharist and the Poetic Imagination in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 54.

⁴ Read, *The Eucharist and the Poetic Imagination*, 59.

⁵ These terms are drawn from I.A. Richards, *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1937), 89–115. Stated simply, the vehicle is something which embodies the tenor, and the tenor is the purport or general drift of the metaphor.

place in the canon of English literature.⁶ In the sixteenth century, this discrimination operated directly, and the production of Catholic devotional literature was often considered a seditious act, prosecuted as a libellous attack on the monarch and a threat to the English state.⁷ The Acts of Uniformity and Supremacy (1558), which were in force during Southwell's lifetime, imposed fines on those who did not attend Anglican services and required subjects to acknowledge the monarch as 'Supreme Governor of the Church' or face imprisonment. In later centuries, other mechanisms dissuaded Catholics and non-conformist Christians from becoming involved in public life. The Test Acts, passed between 1661 and 1678, limited access to public office as well as to education, and required that anyone out of communion with the Church of England live at least 10 miles from London. Given the impact of these historical realities on Southwell's reception and his familiarity to modern readers, I include a brief biographical sketch here before proceeding with my main thesis.

Southwell was the most consequential Catholic poet of the Elizabethan era and has been shown to influence passages by Shakespeare and Herbert among others.⁸ He was ordained as a member of the Society of Jesus in 1584, having left England to complete his novitiate on the continent at the English College, Douai. He pursued further studies in philosophy and theology at the English College in Rome and was made prefect of studies at the latter institution, having shown considerable promise in scholarship and oratory. During these years of preparation for ministry, he composed poetry in Latin and Italian, developing such fluency that when he returned to his native tongue the language seemed unfamiliar and needed to be honed by translating Pseudo-Origen's *Audivimus Mariam* into English.⁹ He returned to England in 1586 where he employed his literary talents to great avail, producing most of the poetry and prose for which he is now known.¹⁰ These texts circulated in manuscript and underground printings that served to discourage apostasy, proselytise to sympathetic parties and protest the activities of the state.¹¹ Southwell was eventually sentenced to death for 'high treason' on account of his activities. After a year and a half of solitary confinement and torture, he was brought to Tyburn where he was hung, drawn and quartered on 21 February 1595. He

⁶ Alison Shell, *Catholicism, Controversy and the English Literary Imagination, 1558–1660* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, rpr. 2001), 56–107.

⁷ Debora Shuger, *Censorship and Cultural Sensibility: The Regulation of Language in Tudor-Stuart England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 56–77.

⁸ Louis Martz, *The Poetry of Meditation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954), 179–211; Shell, *Catholicism, Controversy*, 58–63; Garry Bouchard, *Southwell's Sphere: The Influence of England's Secret Poet* (South Bend: St. Augustine Press, 2018), *passim*.

⁹ This became the skeleton for Southwell's work 'Mary Magdalen's Funeral Tears'. Helen C. White, 'The Contemplative Element in Robert Southwell', *The Catholic Historical Review*, 48:1 (1962), 1–11 (7).

¹⁰ Christopher Devilin, *The Life of Robert Southwell, Poet and Martyr* (London: Longmans, 1956), 79–90.

¹¹ I see Southwell's verse as supporting a recusant community, in contrast to the anti-communitarian reading proffered by Amber True in 'Revising Orthodoxy in the Poems of Robert Southwell', *Renaissance* 72:1 (2020), 43–60. In my view, True confuses the general language of *contemptus mundi* with an individualist theology fearful of companionship.

was eventually canonized in 1970 by Pope Paul VI along with 39 other English martyrs of the Reformation.¹²

Louis Martz first drew attention to Southwell's skill in 'sacred parody', the art of transforming secular literary forms into a medium for religious expression. This might aptly be called parodic because it is at once imitative and subversive of the original form. Martz focused on the most explicit cases of this, where Southwell introduces small changes into existing poems to reframe them as religious works. Such is the case in Southwell's version of Sir Edmund Dyer's 'My Mind to Me a Kingdom Is'; this turned the original poem into a sinner's complaint, with the narrator seeking stability in God against the vicissitudes of the court.¹³ He is especially interested in Southwell's psychological monologues, such as 'Mary Magdalen's Funeral Tears' and 'St Peter's Complaint' which, he argues, are similar to Ignatian spiritual exercises, while presenting themselves in the formal trappings of a secular 'lover's complaint'.¹⁴ Despite these promising identifications, Martz does not go far enough in explaining how Southwell responds to secular verse by producing a distinctive recusant poetics. He has also been criticised by Scott Pilarz for overplaying the influence of Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises* on Southwell to the exclusion of other traditions that formed him, for instance, Jesuit pedagogy and its attention to classical literature.¹⁵ Pilarz is also attentive to more irenic elements in Southwell's verse, recognising that 'religious identity in Southwell's England was more fluid than once imagined'.¹⁶ He is right to notice that whilst Southwell is critical of secular verse and the persecution of his compatriots, he does not position himself as a crusader for the counter-Reformation. He sees himself as reminding the English of their true native religion rather than berating a barbarous land for apostasy. An important nuance, sometimes underplayed in Pilarz's book, is the distinction between the sympathy Southwell has for the English laity and his more forceful criticisms of the policy of the Elizabethan state.¹⁷

When Southwell, in the verse introduction to his work 'Saint Peters Complaint', writes: 'still finest wits are stilling Venus' Rose' but 'to Christian

¹² Nancy Pollard Brown, 'Southwell, Robert [St Robert Southwell] (1561–1595), writer, Jesuit, and martyr'. *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-26064>> (accessed August 2021).

¹³ Martz, *Poetry of Meditation*, 183–91. See also the excellent discussion of this poem in Scott R. Pilarz, *Robert Southwell and the Mission of Literature 1561–1595* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 85–9.

¹⁴ Pilarz, *Mission of Literature*, 75–81 and 206–10. Southwell's own programme of Ignatian exercises, written during his novitiate, explore his journey to overcome doubts about his vocation, they may go some way towards explaining the special place of St Peter in his poetry. See Southwell, *Spiritual Exercises and Devotions*.

¹⁵ Pilarz, *Mission of Literature*, xxvi–xxviii; for Pilarz's attention to classical influences, see 83–4, 89–90, 98–9, etc.

¹⁶ Pilarz, *Mission of Literature*, xxviii. Jillian Snyder has also drawn attention to the appeal of Southwell's 'St Peter's Complaint' to Protestant readers and suggests that the work was purposefully compatible with non-Catholic devotional practices. 'Pricked Hearts and Penitent Tears: Embodying Protestant Repentance in Robert Southwell's Saint Peter's Complaint (1595)', *Studies in Philology* (2020), 313–36.

¹⁷ Works in the latter category may sometimes assume a conciliatory tone for pragmatic reasons. See, for instance, my comments below on the polite fiction at work in *An Humble Supplication*.

workes, few have their tallents lent',¹⁸ his complex ambivalence towards erotic verse is evident. Southwell admired the 'finest wits' of England enough to emulate aspects of their style but he also associated their work with the moral decline of post-Reformation England. He uses the phrase 'stilling Venus' Rose' to mean far more than merely 'distilling' 'Venus' Rose' into a perfume: he puns to indicate that these poets are 'styling' amorous poetry to the detriment of religious 'works' of print. He feared this was also discouraging Christian 'works', taken in another sense, by glamorising promiscuity and courtly intrigue.

We might find similar denunciations of the misspent labours of secular writers in poems by Herbert or Vaughan. Yet as is often the case with Southwell, a writer much given to doubleness and ambiguity, there is another meaning to this criticism of his contemporaries, a meaning which turns our attention to one of his most interesting stylistic innovations. Secular writers are 'stilling' metaphors, in the sense of taking them out of motion, pinning them down, and leaving them lifeless. Southwell seems to pursue a specific objection to the overuse and so degradation of metaphor, a practice which has turned images like 'Venus' Rose' into mere 'truth[s] tired with iteration', as Shakespeare's Troilus lamented.¹⁹ This problem is familiar to contemporary literary critics, who speak of 'dead metaphors' which are drained of their evocative force and perceived as mere idioms or collocations.

My own approach builds on the work of Martz and Pilarz but focuses on a single technique primarily evident in Southwell's lyric poetry. I too see Southwell engaging with neo-Petrarchan works like Philip Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella* and some of the offerings in *Tottel's Miscellany*. I suggest that 'literalising' metaphor is more than a means to embed references to martyrdom in his verse; it also contributes to Southwell's aesthetic project by shockingly inverting platitudes taken from love poetry. At this point, it is worth being more specific about what I mean by 'literalising' metaphor. When George Puttenham writes of metaphor, or 'the figure of transport' as he terms it, he says that it is 'a kind of wresting of a single word from his own right signification to another not so natural, but yet of some affinity or conveniency with it'.²⁰ Literalising shifts the emphasis still further from the 'right signification', which often means a reprioritising of vehicle and tenor in the poem.²¹

¹⁸ *St Robert Southwell: Collected Poems*, (ed.) Peter Davidson and Anne Sweeney (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 63.

¹⁹ *The Norton Shakespeare*, (ed.) Stephen Greenblatt et al. (New York: Norton, 2008), 1897.

²⁰ George Puttenham, *The Art of English Poesy: A Critical Edition*, (ed.) Frank Whigham and Wayne A. Rebhorn (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011), 262.

²¹ In this piece, I am primarily concerned with metaphor as a literary device rather than with the role it plays in cognition. For notable examples of this view, see *Language, Thought, and Reality: Selected Writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf*, (ed.) John B. Carroll (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1956) and George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors we Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980 rpr. 2003). For a survey of more recent work on the psychological implications of metaphor see Raymond W. Gibbs Jr, 'Metaphor and Thought: The State of the Art', in Raymond W. Gibbs Jr, (ed.) *The Cambridge Handbook of Metaphor and Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 3–13.

Conventionally, the vehicle of a metaphor is essentially fictive, existing for the sake of modifying our understanding of the tenor. For instance, we might consider the following example from Sidney:

Queen Virtue's court, which some call Stella's face,
 Hath his front built of alabaster pure;
 Gold is the covering of that stately place.
 The door, by which sometimes comes forth her grace,
 Red porphyry is, which lock of pearl makes sure;
 Whose porches rich (which name of 'cheeks' endure)
 Marble, mixed red and white, do interlace.²²

The reader will be under no misapprehension that 'Queen Virtue's court' actually exists.²³ We take the vehicle as a fantasy which Astrophel uses to guide us through his remembrance of Stella's visage, lingering on each architectural element so that its superlative construction communicates the perfection of a facial feature. We know that Sidney does not intend us to pry too deep into the plausibility of the vehicle. For instance, it would be churlish to ask why this Court of Virtue is secured with a lock made from as soft a material as pearl. The analogy with teeth is the point and their figurative significance as barriers to the long-awaited kiss makes the lock of pearl an appropriate part of the fiction.

We can contrast this with what I have called 'literalising' metaphor. 'Literalising' involves Southwell focusing intensely on the vehicle until its figurative nature is drawn into question and it starts to look like a real diegetic object.²⁴ This is a natural counterpart to figures of rhetoric like *metalepsis* and *catachresis* that draw attention to the unreality of their vehicles by unlikely juxtapositions and obvious continuity errors. A more extreme form of 'literalising' involves an entirely new reading of a poem emerging from taking seriously the shift of attention towards the vehicle. In such a case, the poet presents the reader with an alternate narrative formed by the interaction of concretised vehicles. Whereas Sidney's edifice was a vanishing fancy, in several of Southwell's poems the vehicle becomes the primary subject of his verse and is used to broach subjects which he treats more cautiously on a figurative level.

In this way, I argue that Southwell is upending the normal approach to metaphor as a means to conceal deeper layers of meaning in his poetry. By reading the vehicles of his metaphors literally instead of figuratively, we can unfold subversive political and religious elements in his writing. There is a confluence of his political and aesthetic interests here. 'Sacred parody' affords him

²² *Sir Philip Sidney: The Major Works*, (ed.) Katherine Duncan-Jones (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 156.

²³ I stress that it is not just unreal in sense that it comprises a work of fiction. It does not proclaim a real existence within the fictive world of the narrative, nor a continuity with other imagined spaces of the sonnet sequence.

²⁴ That is to say, something which presents itself as real within the context of a fictive narrative.

the opportunity to hide criticism of the Elizabethan regime in plain sight; Southwell misdirects the uninitiated reader by participating in the formal traditions of the neo-Petrarchan love lyric, whilst charging the vehicles of his metaphors with an alternate significance which is literal.

The language of ‘vehicle’ and ‘tenor’ is convenient to explain what it means to ‘literalise’ metaphor, but it could have the unintended effect of implying a one-way interaction, leading us into what Max Black taxonomizes as the ‘comparison’ and ‘substitution’ views of metaphor.²⁵ In reality, I subscribe more to what Black would call an ‘interaction’ view of metaphor, which recognises that how we perceive each half of the metaphor depends upon the other.²⁶ The two components cooperate together to create new meaning and although they can be legitimately separated to talk of ‘literal’ and ‘figurative’ layers of meaning, there is semantic exchange too. Though not so obvious as the vehicle’s influence on the tenor, upon reflection, one recognises that how we have imagined Burnes’s ‘red, red rose’ or Shakespeare’s ‘summer’s day’ depends greatly on what they symbolise. Had they appeared in poems whose subject was anger, our mind might have been attracted to the thorns of the rose and not its luscious petals, to the desiccating rays of desert sun and not the genial warmth that shines on a garden in bloom.²⁷ This interchange between the components within a metaphor will become important later on in my discussion of Southwell’s poem ‘Christ’s Bloody Sweat’, where I explore how paradoxes in literal readings catalyse new figurative meanings.

The approach I take in this article has similarities with that advanced by Kimberly Johnson in her book *Made Flesh: Sacrament and Poetics in Post-Reformation England*.²⁸ Johnson does not consider Southwell, but she argues that other lyric poets in the seventeenth century emphasised the literal qualities of their verse under the sway of a poetics shaped by the Eucharistic debates of the Reformation.²⁹ Her chapter on John Donne comes closest to describing ‘literalising’ in one of the senses I highlight in this article; in an analysis of his Easter 1624 sermon, she writes: ‘By amplifying a readerly sense of symbolic

²⁵ Max Black, *Models and Metaphors* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1962), 31–3. Similar understandings of metaphor have been put forward by M.C. Beardsley and some of the New Critics. For a discussion of this, see Wallace Martin, ‘Metaphor’ in *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), <<https://www.proquest.com/publication/2049838?OpenUrlRefId=info:xri/sid:primo&parentSessionId=4JVqkNVEIBZigCO8o9e%2BLzj8ITFn%2FwYNWt70Hveb884%3D&accountid=9851>> (accessed March 2022).

²⁶ Black, *Models and Metaphors*, 38–46.

²⁷ Strictly speaking both are similes, but the vehicle/tenor distinction is equivalent and they are familiar examples. Putterham does not distinguish between metaphor and simile when he describes ‘the figure of transport’, *Art of English Poesy*, 263.

²⁸ Kimberly Johnson, *Made Flesh: Sacrament and Poetics in Post-Reformation England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014).

²⁹ Johnson, *Made Flesh*, 1–34. The idea that Southwell’s poetics developed from contemporary sacramental debates is important for Read, *The Eucharist and the Poetic Imagination*, 3–39 and Shaun Ross, ‘Robert Southwell: Sacrament and Self’, *English Literary Renaissance*, 47:1 (2017), 73–109.

disorientation, metaphor promotes the figurative surface, reinscribing the vehicle as a thing in itself, and provides a model of tropic immanence as it gestures not beyond but toward itself.³⁰

However, the sacramental poetics which frames Johnson's wider argument cause her understanding of 'literalising' to differ from my own in important ways. For Johnson, it is crucial that the literal and figurative meanings coincide when the literal is foregrounded, whereas in my argument it is significant that they often diverge. She lays out an analogy between the poetic techniques she observes and the convergence of the *res et signum* in the host in Eucharistic theology, quoting Aquinas: 'Nam in sacramento Eucharistiae id quod est res et sacramentum est in ipsa materia [In the sacrament of the Eucharist what we call the "thing and sign" is in the very matter]'.³¹ I sometimes point to the divergence of literal and figurative meanings in Southwell, noting that he encourages a contrast between these levels of meaning to create irony. The figurative meanings of Petrarchan tropes are subverted by the horror of literalised meanings juxtaposed with them. This irony is a kind of 'interaction' (in Black's language) which changes how we think about both sides of the metaphor. Together with the defamiliarising force acquired by literalised metaphors, this irony is the means by which Southwell furthers his aesthetic project to 'revivify' worn-out literary constructions in the service of theology. Another point of contrast with Johnson's book is the explanation she provided for attention to the literal and material dimension in verse. Johnson claims that for her writers a poetics that 'promotes the meaningfulness of the sensual world and argues for the fitness of that world for realizing presence objectively'³² emerges from their exposure to Eucharistic debates. For her, literalising is a by-product of the intense scrutiny given to material things as bearers of meaning in the domain of sacramental theology, which comes to manifest itself as a general approach to representation. Though I consider sacramental passages in Southwell's writing, I do not rely so heavily on sacramentalism as an explanation for his attention to the literal. I see 'literalising' as a deliberate technique to conceal subversive messages for a coterie of readers in the catacombs of Elizabethan England.

In taking the literal seriously, my approach also bears some similarities with the growing interest of critics in 'surface reading' as an alternative to the 'symptomatic' approaches which had gained currency under the influence of Marxist and Psychoanalytic criticism in the late twentieth century.³³ Southwell

³⁰ Johnson, *Made Flesh*, 102.

³¹ Johnson, *Made Flesh*, 7.

³² Johnson, *Made Flesh*, 32.

³³ Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, 'Surface Reading: An Introduction', *Representations* 108:1 (2009), 1–21. The rest of the issue presents a variety of approaches exemplary of 'surface reading'. Rita Felski has also been an important figure in motivating some to turn to 'surfaces' and away from 'symptomatic' modes of reading, see *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

does not deny the figurative aspects of metaphors and many of his other poems use metaphor in more traditional ways. I focus on the technique of literalising because it is distinctive, unorthodox and present in some of Southwell's finest poems. In the course of my readings, I will even suggest that some of Southwell's figurative uses of language may have an undercurrent of literal meaning because they are intended to be read typologically.³⁴

Southwell's most widely anthologised poem, 'The Burning Babe', creates subversive undercurrents of meaning by reimagining two of Petrarch's most imitated tropes: the 'tortured lover' and the 'fires of passion'. In emphasising their relevance to a community of devotion subject to real torture and immolation, Southwell undermines the hyperbole ingrained in sixteenth-century love poetry, giving the tropes a literal force which makes the original usage darkly ironic. This technique has political as well as literary significance, since playing with the doubleness inherent in metaphor allows him to plausibly deny the poem's real subject, an example of the 'functional ambiguity' which, according to Annabel Patterson, typifies early modern literature engaged with sensitive political subjects.³⁵

From the very start, 'The Burning Babe' unfolds in Petrarchan terms: 'As I in hoary Winter's night stode shyveringe in the snowe/ Surpris'd I was with sodayne heat, which made my hart to glowe'. We have here the suddenness of emotion characteristic of the lover's experience, an opposition of experiential qualities (heat and cold), and an almost instantaneous move towards a symbolic or metaphorical register – the 'sudden heat' is glossed as an affective encounter which 'made my heart to glow'. Southwell is rehearsing an archetypal scenario of the Italianate love poem. This is the moment when a distressed lover views the object of his love and surrenders to the warmth of hope which overwhelms and displaces the coldness of his fears. Yet, in a radical revision of our expectations, Southwell reveals the source of this warmth to be an infant proleptically anguished by the pains of crucifixion:

And lifting up a fearefull eye to vewe what fyre was nere
 A pretty babe all burning bright did in the ayre appear
 Who scorched with excessive heate such floodes of tearse did shedd
 As though his floods should quench his flames, which with his tears were
 fedd³⁶

Christ has displaced Laura as the focus of devotion in this meditation – the piece may be clothed in Petrarchan turns of phrase, but its aspirations are really moral and Christological. The 'fearful eye' the narrator 'lifts' is not

³⁴ Sophie Read has previously suggested that Southwell uses metaphor typologically, see *The Eucharist and the Poetic Imagination*, 62–6.

³⁵ Annabel Patterson, *Censorship and Interpretation: The Conditions of Writing and Reading in Early Modern England* (Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1984), 3–24.

³⁶ Southwell, *Collected Poems*, 14.

afraid of rejection but is rather in that positive state of respectful awe which the Old Testament calls 'fear'.³⁷

With this shift in subject comes a development of the central metaphor. The heat of passion felt by the narrator has been turned into something like the otherworldly *calor* experienced by mystics such as Richard Rolle.³⁸ It becomes a mystical experience of the joy the narrator feels in discovering the depths of God's love but also a sadness in recalling human unworthiness and responsibility. This impression is reinforced when Southwell's narrator starts to allegorise the poem, announcing that 'love is the fire, and sighs the smoke, the ashes shame and scornes'. These are earthly humiliations which God deigned to endure at Calvary, but they are also the emotions which we must relive in compunction for our sins. The association of 'ashes' with 'shame and scornes' calls to mind the ejection and ritual marking of sinners, on Ash Wednesday, a staple of the pre-Tridentine liturgy.³⁹ This penitential implication has been picked up by other readers of the poem; Gary Kuchar sees the central metaphor of the poem as Christ the 'alembic-furnace or *fornax tribulationis*' that purifies sinner's hearts.⁴⁰

Southwell now extends the image to think about the physical effects the inferno will inflict upon the helpless infant, treating what seemed to be an allegorical vehicle as a literal force of nature. The Christ child is weeping, 'scorched with excessive heate', he is enveloped by smoke and ash in a fire not so much of romantic passion as of *patiens* (suffering). Retaining flashes of the Petrarchan aesthetic allows Southwell to explore the boundary between the literal and the metaphorical and the trope of paradox is especially important for this. In Petrarch's lyrics, paradox is employed figuratively to communicate the extremes of pleasure and pain associated with love, whereas for Southwell, the miraculous and the supernatural create a space where paradox can be accounted literal reality. In the line 'As though his floods should quench his flames, which with his tears were fedd', we are presented with a double paradox. First of all, we have the elemental paradox of water fuelling flames when it ought to extinguish them, but secondly, we have the paradox of cause and effect created by the idea that the tears which have been caused by the flames are actually a fuel causing the conflagration. But we can make sense of such happenings as part of a miraculous vision without disputing their diegetic reality, just as we are not called to doubt the survival of the child amidst the flames. The figurative

³⁷ For instance, Genesis 22:12, Isaiah 11:3, Proverbs 9:10 (NRSV).

³⁸ *The Incendium Amoris of Richard Rolle of Hampole*, (ed.) Margaret Deanesly (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1915), 145 and 221. The focus on Ignatian spirituality has overshadowed the influence of pre-reformation mystical traditions on Southwell, which is fertile ground for future work.

³⁹ John Harper, *The Forms and Orders of Western Liturgy from the Tenth to the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 142.

⁴⁰ Gary Kuchar, *Redrawing the Map of Early Modern English Catholicism* (University of Toronto Press, 2012), 59.

need not be banished by such a reading. Allegorically, the fire is an expression of God's love, which is both unlimited and self-reinforcing, revealed to us in Christ's tears upon the cross. Literalising metaphor sometimes involves complicating figurative readings with a literal alternative rather than displacing them altogether.

Whereas the earthly lover is enervated by paradox, torn between extremes of feeling that militate against each other, the religious contemplative is carried forward by paradox deeper into the mysteries of faith, towards a fuller experience of God's glory. Indeed, paradox has played an important role in Christian mysticism, serving to apophatically deny the capacity of earthly language to encompass God's supermundane nature.⁴¹ In the Petrarchan tradition, the flames exist only as a symbol, referring beyond itself to an experience of intense emotion that comes and goes by fits. Yet in Southwell's image the symbol and its referent cannot be distinguished. Scripture tells us that 'God *is* love',⁴² and so Southwell's flaming Christ child embodies that love to which the metaphorical flames refer. Like the tongues of fire at Pentecost, the flames of the burning bush or the fiery, cloudy pillar, Southwell's image functions as a literal empirical revelation of the Holy Spirit. Both F.W. Brownlowe and Sophie Read have previously highlighted the centrality of paradox to Southwell's poetics and have drawn our attention to its political and theological advantages.⁴³ My particular interest in paradox is in its liminal quality. It forces us to shift the reference frame between the literal and the figurative in order to make sense of the fact of contradiction. Paul Ricoeur has suggested that metaphor itself is fundamentally about paradox. This is because the central copula of the metaphor (the *is*) actually denies as much as it affirms the relationship between two things. If the two terms of the metaphor were truly identical we would have no need to predicate one of the other. For Ricoeur, meaning is created by the irreconcilable tension between two defective interpretations invoked by copula: one wholly literal and the other wholly figurative.⁴⁴ We must, then, resist the temptation to separate literal and figurative too starkly, since both might be best understood in the *tertium quid* that proceeds from their cooperation or 'interaction'.

Crossing the boundary between a figurative and a literal focus, we find another dimension to the theological image of the 'Burning Babe' which is political in nature. Though burning for 'heresy' was uncommon by the time that Southwell was writing, the use of this punishment for several centuries, up until the first quarter of the sixteenth century, had cemented its association with martyrdom in the popular imagination.⁴⁵ The conflation of the Petrarchan fires of emotion with burning for the faith appears in

⁴¹ Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God. Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 19–49.

⁴² 1 John 4:8.

⁴³ Brownlow, *Robert Southwell*, 131–7; Read, *The Eucharist and the Poetic Imagination*, 40–68.

⁴⁴ Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor* (Oxford: Routledge, 2003), 291–302.

⁴⁵ Brad Gregory, *Salvation at Stake* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 74–95.

several of his other poems, notably in his Latin invocation to St Catherine. Southwell likens his grief over the persecution of other Catholics to being incinerated, exclaiming: 'Dic mihi cur tacitis intus miser ignibus urar/ Dic mihi cur mordax vicera luctus edat?' (Tell me why I am burned from within, in my wretchedness, by silent fires, tell me why biting grief consumes my insides?) He calls on the saint to 'extinguendis ignibus affer aquas' (bring water to extinguish the fires).⁴⁶ One assumes he wants the Saint to quench literal fires of martyrdom more than to assuage his sorrow. The figurative pain he endures here is a foretaste of the real burning and disembowelment he fears in his future. By presenting an apparition consumed in flames in 'The Burning Babe', Southwell is surely suggesting that Christ's passion prefigures the execution of martyrs in his own day in a manner akin to the types and antitypes of scripture.⁴⁷ So too the martyrs of old, like St Catherine, participate in an eternal phenomenon through their sacrifices and fulfil a typological pattern stretching back to the pascal lambs of Exodus.⁴⁸ As St Augustine describes it, typology differs from the strictly metaphorical by associating two events which are each presented as literal historical reality.⁴⁹ This too, then, is an expression of Southwell's desire to revivify metaphor by superimposing the literal onto the figurative. The faithful martyrs of Tyburn enact the metaphors of devotion and *imitatio Christi* day by day in the supreme literalisation of self-sacrifice.

In the *Rime Sparse*, Petrarch uses the sigh as a symbol of emotion entering language, as Ullrich Langer puts it: 'the sigh is not what one says or writes, but the primary connection between voice and affect that will then give rise to speech'. Yet for Southwell the sigh is a desperate exhalation in the martyr's pyre and is emphatically non-symbolic. When martyrs burn they do not toss and turn in the fires of love, their 'sighs'⁵⁰ actually mingle with the 'smoke' that was a body moments previously; the 'shame and scornes' that attached to them in the crowd's mockery are reduced to mere ashes by tongues of fire. The Christ child's words 'so will I melt into a bath to wash them in my blood',³⁶ is another seemingly figurative line which calls to be read literally. If we take it figuratively, Christ is expounding the theology of the atonement. He says that his innocence in death pays the price for all sin, and so it is like he 'washes' us

⁴⁶ Southwell, *Collected Poems*, 105.

⁴⁷ Theresa M. Kenny has previously commented on Christ as the 'nexus of time and eternity' in this poem. 'The Christ Child on Fire: Southwell's Mighty Babe', *English Literary Renaissance*, 43:3 (2013), 415–45 (417).

⁴⁸ Here, I am invoking what Charles Taylor calls 'high time' as opposed to the linear timescale that dominates the contemporary world. Within this worldview, certain moments of spiritual significance have a closeness that transcends their position in continuum of the *saeculum*. See, Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (London: Harvard, 2007), 55–6.

⁴⁹ Augustine, *Quaest. in Hept.* 2, 73, *Patrologia Latina* 34:623, cited in *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 129, see also Henri de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis: The Four Senses of Scripture*, Vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing co, 2009), 9–18.

⁵⁰ For an example of the kind of verse that Southwell responds to here, see 'Behind the Sixteenth Year of My Sighes' in *Petrarch's Lyric Poems: The Rime Sparse and Other Lyrics*, trans. by Robert M. Durling (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), 226–7.

in a bath of his blood. But for the martyrs, ‘baptism by blood’ was a literal affair. Dissolving into a pool of gore in the pyre was a sacramental moment of spiritual change which purified the martyr. Southwell describes this act as something literal, a process of going beyond the figurative, in his *Epistle of Comfort* (1587) to the recusant Earl of Arundel who was imprisoned on conspiracy charges: ‘so muche therefore as immitation in deede, is better then representation in the figure, and desyre in the thoughte: so muche doth the baptesme of blood, surpasse those of water and spirite’.⁵¹

Southwell was no doubt aware that Petrarch had toyed with the image of the lover as martyr, figuratively dying at the hands of his beloved’s frigid cruelty.⁵² We might even say that Southwell is playing Petrarch at his own game. Where the Italian Laureate had repurposed religious images to capture the highest intensity of feeling known to his culture, Southwell restores these images to what he considers their rightful purpose. By juxtaposing the literal reality of suffering for God with a baser erotic love he discovers an unintended bathos in the Petrarchan images, which shoot so high they miss the parapet and tumble towards the ridiculous.

Whilst the subject of martyrdom is always treated with caution, it is less opaque in another of Southwell’s finest poems, vivid even its title: ‘Christ’s Bloody Sweat’. Southwell imagines Christ as a confluence of different iconographical images which would contradict one another if considered literally:

He Pelicans, he Phoenix fate doth prove
 Whome flames consume whom streames enforce to die
 How burneth blood howe bleedeth burning love
 Can one in flame and streame both bathe and frye
 How could he joyne Phenix fyreye paynes
 In faynting pelicans still bleeding vaynes⁵³

Southwell returns to his game of transmuting Petrarchan paradox into theological speculation with the rhetorical question: ‘How burneth blood howe bleedeth burning love’? Harking back to iconography,⁵⁴ he reminds us that the blood of the exsanguinated pelican would surely quench the fires of the phoenix: ‘Can one in flame and streame both bathe and frye’? In this line, he takes the literal image of blood and brings it into contact with the figurative flames, apparently making them subject to the laws of physics. He addresses the paradox this creates with another shift to the figurative, reimagining the liquid as a miraculous fuel, stating that this fire is

⁵¹ Southwell, *An epistle of comfort to the reverend priestes, & to the honorable, worshipful, & other of the laye sort restrayned in durance for the Catholike fayth* (London, 1587), 142.

⁵² See, for example, *Petrarch’s Lyric Poems*, trans. by Durling, 52–3, 54–5, 60–8, etc.

⁵³ Southwell, *Collected Poems*, 17.

⁵⁴ For an account of the Christological significance of the pelican see Michael Ferber, *A Dictionary of Literary Symbols* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 159.

'fedd with gory bloode' just as blood, with all of its humoral connotations, fuels the fire of passion in amorous verse. The phoenix, with its Christological associations firmly established in mediaeval bestiaries like the *Physiologus*,⁵⁵ is another image which Southwell shares with Petrarch. Again, the 'ashes' in Southwell's verse do not represent the ravages of love; they result from an actual combustion of human flesh and yet, like the phoenix, they live on through the spiritual rebirth of the martyr in heaven. We see a mixing of the literalistic embodied element of the image with the figurative domain of allegory and iconography. Southwell is drawing out the graphic and visceral details of severed 'vaynes' and 'streams' of blood from a two-dimensional architectural image. By doing this, he anthropomorphises the birds and suggests a parallelism with martyrdom. In addition to its iconographic resonance, the burning bird may even have had a secondary political meaning for Southwell's readership. Alison Shell has noted the symbolic uses of the fable of the eagle that burned its own nest by stealing a sacrifice from a temple altar with an ember still lodged within it.⁵⁶ Shell argues that in recusant communities the story became a symbol of the divine vengeance that they hoped would be visited upon the English state for the dissolution of the monasteries and the theft of Church property.

I have already alluded to the political advantages of Southwell's unorthodox uses of metaphor and of ambiguity; I now give a fuller sense of what is meant by this. In the hands of a faithful reader literalising metaphor might unfold linguistic puzzles. Take, for instance, this passage from 'Christ's Bloody Sweat':

Fat soile, full spring, sweete olive, grape of blisse,
 That yeelds, that streams, that pours, that dost distil,
 Untilled, undrawne, unstamped, untoucht of presse,
 Dear fruit, cleare brooks, faire oile, sweet wine at will!
 Thus Christ unforst prevents in shedding blood
 The whips, the thornes, the nailes, the speare, and roode.

Southwell uses asyndeton to build a stream of images 'that yeelds, that streams, that pours' through our imagination as the torrent of ferocious metaphors, interlinked through internal rhyme, repetition and homeoteleuton,⁵⁷ convince us that the cascading blood is a force of life not death. But there is more to this passage than first meets the eye. As Peter Davidson and Anne Sweeney have noted, the first four lines of the stanza act like a mathematical square since they can be read both across and down,⁵⁸ where

⁵⁵ Ferber, *Dictionary of Literary Symbols*, 160–1.

⁵⁶ Alison Shell, *Catholicism and Oral Culture in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 28–9.

⁵⁷ A rhetorical technique consisting of patterned repetition of word endings.

⁵⁸ Southwell, *Collected Poems*, 154. See also Gary Kulchar's reading, 'Poetry and Sacrament in the English Renaissance', 56–7 in *A companion to Renaissance poetry*, (ed.) Catherine Bates (Hoboken: Wiley Blackwell, 2018), 50–62.

they create cogent sentences such as: ‘grape of blisse,/that dost distil,/untoucht of presse,/sweet wine at will!’ Southwell encourages complex reading practices in these cryptic schemes, prompting the reader to disassemble and rearrange the text. This separates lines from the unity of sense which follows from a conventional reading of the metaphor and uncovers their political subtexts.

These lines reveal another kind of literalising effect as the dissociation of terms from conventional syntax emphasises the vehicle over the tenor and draws attention to how agricultural processes might echo the torturous process of martyrdom. Thus, we might find a counterpart to the description of Christ’s torments: ‘The whips, the thornes, the nailes, the speare, and roode’ in ‘Untilled, undrawne, unstamped, untoucht of presse’ which seems suggestive of many implements in the early modern inquisitor’s arsenal. The word ‘undrawn’ seems especially out of place and might refer to the practice of ‘drawing’ out entrails, part of repertoire of punishments Catholic martyrs were subject to, since their opposition to the religion of the state was accounted treason. In a similar manner, ‘untoucht of presse’ recalls implements such as ‘The Scavenger’s Daughter’, which would compress the body so as to induce excruciating pain. Southwell would later describe the use of this implement in his prose work *An Humble Supplication to Her Maiestie* (1592).⁵⁹

Martyrdom may also be implied by figurative readings of alternative syntax. Another vertical arrangement of phrases from the poem produces ‘Fat soile/ That yeelds, Untilled, Dear fruit’. This could be taken as a reference to the spiritual fruits which are experienced by Jesus’ followers after Pentecost, or perhaps the fruits of virtue expressed in the martyr’s sacrifice. The persistent association of martyrdom with growth and re-growth in Southwell’s corpus gives a hint of political dissidence in this apparently innocent line. Elsewhere, in ‘Decease Release’, we have heard that ‘the perisht kernell’ of Mary Queen of Scots’ body ‘springeth with increase’⁶⁰; Southwell reminds a waning religious community that the fertile souls of England, though yet ‘untilled’ by true religion, have yielded a fine crop of martyrs.⁶¹

For Shaun Ross, the stanza offers us two distinguishable readings depending on whether we take its lines horizontally or vertically.⁶² He claims that these meanings map onto the Aristotelian distinction between ‘substance’ and ‘accidents’ central to the Catholic understanding of the Eucharist after Lateran IV. The visible qualities of wine (its accidents) are said to be the

⁵⁹ Robert Southwell, *An Humble Supplication to Her Maiestie* (London: 1595), 65. EEBO-TCP: <<https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A12625.0001.001/1:1?rgn=div1;view=fulltext>> (accessed August 2021).

⁶⁰ Southwell, *Collected Poems*, 41.

⁶¹ The language of the harvest also refers to saving souls, often with undercurrents of eschatological meaning (Mark 4:29; Luke 10:2; John 4:35). William Allen, the founder of the English College (Douai) where Southwell trained, writes of students and potential martyrs ‘intended for the English harvest’. Pilarz, *Mission and Literature*, 93.

⁶² Ross, ‘Sacrament and Self’, 86–8.

subject of the horizontal lines, whereas the vertical lines tell of the blood of the crucified saviour (the post-consecration substance). From this interpretation, with its emphasis on the verticality of references to blood, a striking perspective on *mise en page* emerges: 'this downward movement makes possible a visual metaphor in which the words which roll down the page represent the bloody drops of sweat that stream down Christ's body'.⁶³ This last insight is remarkable, but I find the neat separation of horizontal and vertical readings does not hold up as well. In the discussion above, I noted that many of the horizontal lines suggest the violence of martyrdom within agricultural metaphors by concretising their vehicle. In this way, blood and wine, substance and accident, are evoked continuously and sometimes by the very same words.

The figurative language of fertility and regrowth sometimes interacts with undercurrents of more literal meaning. In his poem 'The Flight into Egypt', Swinburn calls the innocent children slaughtered by Herod in Matthew's gospel 'first flowers of Christian spring', recognising that their deaths precede the great efflorescence of his own time. In the last two stanzas of the poem, he implies that this figurative meadow of martyrs is nourished by the literal blood of the fallen children. Whereas in some of Swinburn's other poems, the literal readings co-exist in parallel with the figurative readings, this poem seems to oscillate more, with figurative and literal interpretations cross-pollinating.

Sunne being fled the stares do leese their light
 And Shyninge beames in bloody streames they drenche
 A Cruell storme of Herods mortall spite
 Their lives and lightes with bloody showres doth quench
 The Tiran to be sure of murdringe one
 For feare of sparinge him doth pardon none.

The real light of the stars falls upon the actual 'bloody streames' left by the massacre and at the same time, a metaphoric storm extinguishes the 'lights and lives' of the innocents with a 'bloody shower'. With the shower of blood, we return to the literal reality of the massacre, but the blood is performing an operation both literal and figurative by acting upon the hendiadys 'lives and lightes'. These literal 'bloody showers' then water the ground from which the figurative flowers of martyrdom spring in the next stanza:

O blessed babes, first flowers of Christian springe
 Who though untimely cropt fayre garlandes frame
 With open throats and silent mouthes you singe
 His praise whom age permits you not to name
 Your tunes are teares your instruments are swords
 Your ditte death and blood in lieu of wordes⁶⁴

⁶³ Ross, 'Sacrament and Self', 87.

⁶⁴ Swinburn, *Collected Poems*, 9.

The flowers of martyrdom were ‘cropt’ (decapitated) and now with ‘open throats and silent mouthes [they] singe’. This singing is again both literal and figurative. This is a figurative representation of them proclaiming their faith, an act which characterises the martyr, but it is also the literal singing of the saved in heaven. The image recalls mediaeval hagiographies where resurrected martyrs sing miraculously from beyond the grave.⁶⁵ Southwell continues in a literal vein when we are told they sing ‘His praise whom age permits you not to name’, a line that refers to the fact that the children are literally less than 2 years of age as much as it does figuratively to the hidden divinity of Christ, which will not be known widely until the age *sub gratia*.

Geoffrey Hill has described Southwell as a ‘poet in both verse and prose’,⁶⁶ and another of Southwell’s visceral re-imagining of metaphor can be seen in his pamphlet *An Humble Supplication to Her Maiestie*, believed to be written in the year of his arrest 1592:⁶⁷

Some have bene tortured in such parts, as is almost a torture to Christian ears to heare it; let it then be iudged what it was to Chast and modest men to endure it, the shamme being no lesse offensive to their myndes than the pain (though most excessive) to their bodies [...] some for famine have licked the very moisture of the walls.⁶⁸

The process of literalising is evident in microcosm through the antanacastic play on ‘torture’ moving between a literal and metaphorical sense from the first to the second clause. The wordplay is euphemistic circumlocution, avoiding direct reference to genital mutilation. The innuendos of courtly love poetry have been repurposed to discuss torture in a courtly setting, bringing them before the Queen. In reality, Southwell had little hope of being read by Elizabeth I. He implicitly refers to the imprisonment of Richard Shelley, the last Catholic priest to present her with a pamphlet.⁶⁹ Southwell is using the address to the Queen as a rhetorical device in order to present community-forming literature as though it were political discourse and the polite tone of the piece is appropriate to this fiction. If his writings were ever to make their way to court, his inversion of the tropes of courtly verse to comment on the state’s persecution of Catholics would have had an ironic punch, though he is unlikely to have seriously entertained this prospect. The meagre subsistence of imprisoned martyrs in *An*

⁶⁵ For such tales and their traditional association with the Feast of the Holy Innocents, see Helen Cooper, *The Oxford Guides to Chaucer: The Canterbury Tales* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989, rpr. 2010), 289–91.

⁶⁶ Geoffrey Hill, ‘The Absolute Reasonableness of Robert Southwell’ in *Collected Critical Writings*, (ed.) Kenneth Haynes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 29.

⁶⁷ This date is proposed by Christopher Devlin to replace the anachronistic date of ‘1595’ printed on the original title page. *The Life of Robert Southwell*, 254.

⁶⁸ Southwell, *An Humble Supplication*, 34.

⁶⁹ Southwell, *An Humble Supplication*, 45.

Humble Supplication is described through metaphors repurposed from amorous verse. Petrarch talks of the lover driven to 'feed on tears',⁷⁰ yet Southwell's martyr is placed in a position where scavenging for moisture is a desperate survival tactic and not a fanciful literary device. The hyperbole devalued by love poetry has, once again, become disturbingly appropriate to his task.

Southwell's application of the technique of secular verse to religious subjects is not unique amongst his contemporaries yet his approach to metaphor and his use of paradox sets him apart. The proliferation of verse anthologies in the sixteenth century quickly led to reactions from moralists. John Hall responded to England's first printed anthology of poetry *The Court of Venus* (c.1536), in his parodic work *The Court of Virtue* (1565), which re-imagined it as a collection of moral aphorisms and religious verse. Southwell surpasses his contemporaries, not only remedying the subject of the verse but also breathing new life into its technical features. By charging metaphors with literal significance, Southwell replaces the abstract with the material, moving from emotion to sensation. Southwell's verse is sensitive to its reception by a Catholic audience and its combination of biblical and contemporary devotional material seems tailored for a political subculture of recitation and manuscript transmission.⁷¹ His emphasis on polyvalence allows him to combine a critique of English political and literary culture with theological exposition. His poetry even enables him to act as a confessor from beyond the grave, eulogising martyrs and presenting models of martyr psychology for imitation. Above all, literalising metaphor is about agency; in making the figurative real, Southwell favours action over contemplation, martyrdom over passivity, calling his readers to lend their talents to 'Christian works' and *unstill Venus*' rose.

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⁷⁰ Petrarch's *Lyric Poems*, trans. by Durling, 196.

⁷¹ For an account of the circulation of Southwell's work after his death, see Robert S. Miola, 'Publishing the Word: Robert Southwell's Sacred Poetry', *The Review of English Studies*, 64:265 (2013), 410–32.

Abstract

This article focuses on a distinctive feature of Robert Southwell's poetic technique, namely, his approach to metaphor. I argue that a number of Southwell's metaphors have a surprisingly literal quality where their vehicles are given greater prominence than their tenors. For instance, in my reading of 'The Burning Babe' and 'Christ's Bloody Sweat', I draw attention to how the metaphor of 'the fires of love' comes to describe the literal burning of recusant Catholics in Elizabethan England. Here, the intense feeling figured by the tenor is actually secondary to the burning evoked by the vehicle – an inversion of the usual operation of metaphor. I connect this approach to Southwell's political context as a dissident poet, showing that our tendency to look past the vehicles of metaphors to their referents allowed him to hide political statements in plain sight. I also highlight how 'literalising' metaphors served Southwell's aesthetic project to reform the neo-Petrarchan love lyric in service of religious ends. Selecting certain hyperbolic metaphors from amorous verse, Southwell charged these platitudes with new force by making them literal and so uncovering darker meanings within them.