

Hope against Hope: Abraham Cowley and the Metaphysics of Poetry

The smallest difference between nothingness and coming to rest would be the refuge of hope, the no-man's-land between the border posts of being and nothingness. From that zone consciousness must wrest, not some 'overcoming', but that over which the alternative has no power.¹

1

'It must be however confessed of these writers, that if they are upon common subjects often unnecessarily and unpoetically subtle; yet where scholastick speculation can be properly admitted, their copiousness and acuteness may justly be admired'.² Rare words of praise from Samuel Johnson, amidst an otherwise merciless catalogue of the poets he termed, with some suspicion, 'metaphysical'. Johnson's life of Abraham Cowley presents readers with a sample of the qualities and defects he had noticed in Cowley and a handful of others, principally Cowley's predecessor, John Donne. For all his disapproval, however, Johnson concedes that some topics not only license but positively encourage those writers' brand of 'scholastick speculation'. What prompts this insight is a poem by Cowley on the topic of hope, which, to Johnson's eyes, reveals 'an unequalled fertility of invention' ('Cowley', 213). If metaphysical poetry can ever be justified, if its subtleties can be not just poetic but even necessary, then, for Johnson, it is when it deals with subjects like hope. With that, Johnson qualifies his generally dim view of metaphysical poetry, and at the same time makes explicit a persistent motif of his entire account. His life of Cowley is usually consulted for its definition of metaphysical wit as a discordia concors, by which '[t]he most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together' ('Cowley', 200). But this charge of poetic and cognitive violence can only be understood in conjunction with the subsequent observation that such violence is plainly and ludicrously inadequate.

Metaphysical poetry is defined by its desire to be witty, but also by the way that desire is left open and exposed when, almost inevitably, it fails. It is remarkable not for the violent wilfulness of its synthetic efforts so much as the contrary sense of frailty, in its speakers and their reasoning, that emerges once those efforts fall short. In this light, that more famous pronouncement from Johnson's Life might be balanced by another, equally disparaging formulation: 'Their wish was only to say what they hoped had been never said before' ('Cowley', 201).

Ideas of hope and metaphysics, frailty and violence, form themselves into a constellation around the work of Abraham Cowley. Famously taken as the exemplum of metaphysical poetry, Cowley is often located instead at the moment of its fall. In his 1926 Clark Lectures, T.S. Eliot was unsparing in his contempt for this 'poor metaphysical'; eighty years on, Colin Burrow was more restrained, but hardly more enthusiastic, about a poet too 'arch' to measure up to Donne's example.³ Recent work on Cowley has conversely tended to extricate him from this metaphysical nexus, championing his later experiments in epic or Pindaric, or introducing him into a Restoration milieu, rather than contesting the devaluation of his earlier lyrics.⁴ By way of response, this essay takes as its subject the poem that won Johnson's admiration, usually known as 'Against Hope'. The poem first appeared in the 1646 Steps to the Temple, a collection of sacred verse by Cowley's friend Richard Crashaw, where it was presented as virtually a collaborative endeavor: 'On Hope, By way of Question and Answer, betweene A. Cowley, and R. Crashaw'.⁵ The poets are in dialogue, one stanza by Cowley answered with another by Crashaw, arguments against hope countered by reasons for hoping. At stake for both is the question of what kind of thing hope is—if, indeed, it is anything at all. Cowley begins by posing a dilemma:

Hope, whose weake being ruin'd is
Alike, If it succeed, and if it misse.
Whom Ill, and Good doth equally confound,
And both the hornes of Fates dilemma wound.
Vaine shadow! that doth vanish quite
Both at full noone, and perfect night.
The Fates have not a possibility
Of blessing thee.
If things then from their ends wee happy call,
'Tis hope is the most hopelesse thing of all.

(Steps, 96)

Cowley's alternative is stark: either our hope comes true, in which case it vanishes into reality; or it does not, in which case it remains unreal. Either it is nothing but its object, or else, it is nothing. In his response, Crashaw takes up his friend's challenge:

Deare Hope! Earths dowry, and Heavens debt,
The entity of things that are not yet.
Subt'lest, but surest being! Thou by whom
Our Nothing hath a definition.
Faire cloud of fire, both shade, and light,
Our life in death, our day in night.
Fates cannot find out a capacity
Of hurting thee.
From thee their thinne dilemma with blunt horne

Shrinkes, like the sick Moone at the wholesome morne.

(Steps, 96)

Crashaw turns hope's contradiction into its paradox, while framing it in the same philosophical terms. Hope is a being, subtle but sure; it is an entity, albeit of things that are not yet; it gives definition to the Nothing that is ours and us.

A year after appearing alongside Crashaw's sacred verses, Cowley's poem was reprinted his erotic sequence The Mistress, this time under the title 'Against Hope', and paired with a response, 'For Hope', by Cowley himself. To some, this appears to exemplify a difference in the meaning of hope for the two poets: Cowley's 'dry, brilliant wit' offering a profane, even amorous, version of hope; Crashaw's 'heady, exuberant enthusiasm' pulling it into the realm of the divine.⁶ There is some justice to this reading. The Mistress soon became notorious for its casual secularizing of religious terms. In 1659, the maverick clergyman Edmund Elys lambasted Cowley for using 'these Sacred Words, HEAVEN, DEITY, DIVINE PRESENCE, FAITH &c. to set forth his Dissolute, Amorous Conceptions'; Hope may be another word for the list.⁷ Crashaw, meanwhile, does at moments draw hope into a more conventional relationship with its other theological virtues, as 'Loves Legacie under lock / Of Faith' (Steps, 97). Yet whereas various other seventeenth-century poems on hope are regularly flanked with Faith and Charity—in treatments by Christopher Wyvill the previous year, or Nathanael Richards a decade earlier—'On Hope' teeters on the cusp between the sacred and profane halves of Crashaw's collection, where Steps to the Temple's sacred poetry cedes to the lighter offerings in Delights of the Muses.⁸ That uncertainty registers something of hope's conceptual dilemma. Classical authors had regarded hope with suspicion; and for all the vigor with which St Paul elevates it to a spiritual good, that suspicion hung around. Hope, we will see, remained troubling for theology:

uncertain whether it was virtue or passion, active or passive, spiritual or corporeal, uncertain even whether it was certain or uncertain in its object.⁹ Dividing it into worldly and heavenly forms, splitting its attributes between positive and negative polarities, failed to prevent each extreme from reappearing with the other. And this marked a dialectic that Paul himself had captured, in his riddling description of Abraham's belief: as contra spem in spem, hope against hope (Romans 4:18).

Rather than occupying two discrete positions, Cowley and Crashaw are likewise both working in the perennially contested borderland between metaphysics and theology. In treating hope as an ontological problem, both poets are drawn into the orbit of the question that, since Aristotle, has driven metaphysics: the question of being qua being. This, Aristotle elegiacally remarks, is the question that was first asked long ago, is now, and always will be asked—and will always give rise to further puzzles. Hope is one such puzzle. Insofar as it is neither exhausted nor satisfied by what exists, hope seems by its nature to aim beyond being. It is like an archer, Cowley complains, 'who tak'st thine ayme so farre, / That still, or short, or wide, thine arrowes are' (Steps, 97). This is hope not for this or that, but hope qua hope; and as such, it leaves itself open to the charge of being, precisely, nothing. Wavering on the verge of existence, hope is a metaphysical subject par excellence, and runs as a subterranean theme throughout the history of metaphysics, from Aristotle to Theodor Adorno. Yet its participation in this history remains something of a scandal for any ontology that metaphysics would establish, a remainder that renders its order of being less stable. From the standpoint of hope, metaphysics comes to look as frail as, in truth, it has always been, unsure of both its object and its right to exist. And in that frailty, it discovers a perhaps unexpected solidarity with poetry itself: poetry which, no less than metaphysics, depends on hope for its forms of thinking.

The idea of ‘metaphysical poetry’ was not new to Samuel Johnson; it had been current ever since John Dryden complained that Donne ‘affects the Metaphysicks’, and accused Cowley of copying him ‘to a fault’.¹⁰ Decades earlier, though, John Cleveland had teasingly advised would-be poets to laud their beloved as ‘the Metaphysicks of her Sex’, rattling off some intellectual perplexities with which they might bamboozle women into bed.¹¹ Earlier still, sometime in the 1640s, William Drummond was already bemoaning poetry’s treatment at the hands of those who ‘endeavored to abstracte her to Metaphysicall Ideas, and Scholasticall Quiddities’.¹² Calls for the term to be bracketed, or junked altogether, as an accident of history, risk underestimating that accident’s longevity, and disavowing its historical force, as well as foreclosing the possibility that this history, however ripe for reconstruction, might have its own truth content—that the seventeenth century may indeed witness a peculiar affinity between poetic and metaphysical thought. That affinity looks more plausible than ever following recent work by Gordon Teskey, James Kuzner, Wendy Beth Hyman, and others, on the metaphysical affordances of early modern lyric.¹³ ‘On Hope’ is far from unique in ruminating on the being of concepts, and joins a parade of seventeenth-century lyrics on the thin line between being and nothing. But the terminological fanfare with which these poems begin distinguish them as especially self-conscious essays in the metaphysical style. By extrapolating the philosophical problematic behind them, this essay proposes that Abraham Cowley might show us what makes poetry metaphysical. After a sketch of what metaphysics meant to Cowley, it develops the connection between metaphysics and hope through the troubling concept of dynamis—potentiality—inherited from Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*. It returns in its final parts to Cowley’s poem, to show how, at the micrological level of the sentence, philosophical arguments find themselves altered by way of poetic form. Cowley’s poem on hope is thinking about not just

metaphysics in verse, but the metaphysics of verse: not just the claim to existence that hope might posit, but the distinctive form of claiming or affirming that poetry might allow, and its equally distinctive form of hoping. It offers a prospectus of how we might revisit the dialectic of metaphysical poetry in seventeenth-century England, where poetry departs from metaphysics only in order to live up to its promise.

2

‘On Hope’ was probably written between 1636 and 1643, while Cowley and Crashaw were studying at Cambridge; and it bears the unmistakable marks of the university’s culture of disputation, with its combination of philosophical acuity and rhetorical panache. Philosophy was at the heart of the seventeenth-century curriculum: for undergraduates, principally logic, ethics, and natural philosophy; for graduates, principally metaphysics, as a propaedeutic for theology.¹⁴ Central to all these was the figure of Aristotle, whose continuing dominance in universities was less of a dead hand than some critics alleged.¹⁵ Across Europe, in fact, Aristotelian thought was positively flourishing, not least in the domain of metaphysics. This was due in part to Francisco Suárez, whose 1597 *Disputationes metaphysicae* offered a systematic compendium of the metaphysical tradition, and won readers across national and confessional divides.¹⁶ By the end of the sixteenth century, Reformed universities of various stripes were returning to the metaphysical study they had largely repudiated fifty years earlier.¹⁷ As a result, substantial metaphysical textbooks and manuals emerged on the Reformed side too, from Lutherans like Jakob Martini and Christoph Scheibler, and Calvinists like Bartholomäus Keckermann and Franco Burgersdijk.¹⁸ How far this metaphysical resurgence reached into England requires further research. But these continental textbooks were certainly available and in use, with works by Scheibler and Burgersdijk appearing from presses in London and Oxford over the first half of the

century. In his 'Directions for a Student in the Universitie', likely written during the 1630s, the Cambridge tutor Richard Holdsworth recommends that second year undergraduates familiarize themselves with metaphysics through works by writers across the religious spectrum, from Scheibler to Suárez.¹⁹

Yet metaphysics had its discontents. Among theologians, the opprobrium poured on scholasticism from Luther onwards was still available for polemicists if needed. In his 1638 Religion of Protestants, William Chillingworth defended the Church of England with all the zeal of a recent convert from the charge that its ministers lacked 'any deep knowledge of Philosophy, especially of Metaphysicks':

As if forsooth, because they dispute not eternally, Vtru[m] Chimaera bombinans in vacuo, possit comedere, secundas Intentiones? Whether a Million of Angels may not sit upon a needles point? Because they fill not their brains with notions that signify nothing, to the utter extermination of all reason and common sence, and spend not an Age in weaving and unweaving subtile cobwebs, fitter to catch flyes then Souls; therefore they have no deepe knowledge in the Acroamaticall part of learning!²⁰

The question of angels dancing on pinheads would become shorthand for the absurdity of scholastic metaphysics, even among the subject's defenders, as the most needless point of all.²¹ Meanwhile, on its other flank, metaphysics came under fire from proponents of the new philosophy, as a stronghold of scholastic resistance to corpuscularian renovation. Chillingworth's friend Thomas Hobbes was typically pungent. Those who affected 'Metaphysical subtilties', he declared in De corpore, 'wander from Truth, as if they were led out of their way by an Ignis Fatuus'.²² Playing in his Leviathan on the double meaning of metaphysics, as what is both after

and beyond the natural, he joked that Aristotle's Metaphysics 'is for the most part so far from the possibility of being understood, and so repugnant to natural Reason, that whosoever thinketh there is any thing to be understood by it, must needs think it supernaturall'.²³ No less severe was Thomas Sprat, who in his history of the Royal Society insisted there could be no place in modern learning for 'that Cloudy Knowledge'.²⁴

Among these critics was Abraham Cowley himself: friend to Hobbes and Sprat, and early member of the Royal Society. In his 1656 Poems, professions of allegiance to the new philosophy go hand in hand with ritual disparagements of scholastic metaphysics. A Pindaric ode, 'Life and Fame', takes aim at the question of being itself:

Oh Life, thou Nothings younger Brother!

So like, that one might take One for the other!

What's Some Body, or No Body?

In all the Cobwebs of the Schoolmens trade,

We no such nice Distinction woven see,

As 'tis To be, or Not to Bee.²⁵

That standard image of the cobwebs is explained in a note: 'either because of the too much fineness of the work which makes it slight, and able to catch onely little Creatures; or because they take not the materials from Nature, but spin it out of Themselves' (Poems, 34^v). Throughout Cowley's writing, scholasticism regularly gets the blame for intellectual stagnation. An ode to Hobbes catalogues the decline and fall of Aristotle's philosophy at their hands, until whatever meaning his thought once possessed became 'but empty Air'. Another to the Royal Society repeats the charge, confronting the boastful spectre of scholasticism with the truth that "'twas but Air condens'd'.²⁶ Whatever admiration he professed for the 'great Stagirite' as a schoolboy, in

‘The Motto’ (Poems, B1^v), Cowley’s general opinion of the Aristotelian tradition was dim. So, it seems, was his opinion of metaphysics. In an essay from later years, ‘Of Agriculture’, he advocates for the expansion of practical agricultural schooling, and regrets the incomparably greater attention university students spent on ‘Metaphysick, Physick, Morality, Mathematicke, Logick, Rhetorick, &c.’. All of them are ‘good and useful faculties’, he adds, ‘except only Metaphysick which I do not know whether it be any thing or no’.²⁷

Cowley may thus seem an unlikely candidate for exploring the metaphysics of metaphysical poetry. Yet behind these polemics, the situation was more complex. Philosophically, the battle lines between scholastic and post-scholastic thought were far from clear, with even the loudest critics of the Aristotelian tradition retaining aspects of its framework and vocabulary.²⁸ Indeed, as Marco Sgarbi has argued, the experimental philosophy of the Royal Society may owe something to the strain of Aristotelianism that prevailed within British universities in the seventeenth century, drawing on Jacopo Zabarella and other Italian thinkers, and inclining more to logical and epistemological than metaphysical concerns.²⁹ Even within these polemics, Aristotle’s relation to the Aristotelian tradition could vary: sometimes distinguished from scholasticism, sometimes condemned along with it. More important for reading Cowley is the fascination his poetry shows for what it ostensibly condemns. The orotund nihilism of that opening stanza from ‘Life and Fame’, a tone Cowley borrows from Pindar, derives its power from the infinitesimal resistance it encounters in the ‘Dream of a Shadow’ that is human life: not being exactly, but not nothing either. The difference between life and nothing, being and not being, is nice but real; to ‘take’ one for the other means mistaking them both. Metaphysics may be, as Sprat and others allege, a ‘Cloudy Knowledge’. But Cowley’s poetry is intrigued by cloudiness, by whatever seems airy or insubstantial yet still unmistakably exists. In

The Mistress, this manifests itself through a series of poems on abstractions. Not just hope, but ‘Beauty’, ‘Maidenhead’, and ‘Honour’, all are subjected to critique, and yet all lead his poetry into ever more abstract conceptual territory. Cowley returns continually to these ideas on the edge of being. And while for some this ‘tendency to abstraction’ marks a falling off from the metaphysical tradition, in truth, it is where his poetry comes closest to metaphysics.³⁰ That he recognizes as much is evident from the final stanza of ‘Life and Fame’, where his critique of scholastic emptiness turns on himself: ‘We Poets madder yet then all, / With a refin’d Phantastick Vanitie, / Think we not onely Have, but Give Eternitie’ (Poems, 3F4’).

The way Cowley talks about metaphysics, wondering whether it is ‘any thing or no’, is strikingly similar to the way, in his earlier exchange with Crashaw, he talked about hope. That similarity suggests something of the alliance in which metaphysics and hope are conceptually and historically bound. If hope relies on metaphysics to justify its existence, the existence of metaphysics may be in no less need of justification. The history of metaphysics is a history of its own critique, an enquiry into being whose scrutiny begins with itself; and this has been true from the start.³¹ What became the canonical definition of the subject was laid out by Aristotle, at the beginning of the fourth book of the Metaphysics: ‘There is a certain science that thinks about being insofar as it is being, and the properties that inherently belong to it’ (Γ1, 1003a21-22).³² Yet the confidence of this assertion is clouded by the questions his work has already raised about the validity of such a science. Like its subject, being, metaphysics is at once encompassing and extraneous. It covers all beings, by virtue of the fact that they are beings; but for that reason, it also achieves a level of abstraction that makes it redundant for most scientific purposes. As a result, it occupied an ambiguous position in scientific thought. Despite declaring it the princeps et domina of the sciences, Aristotle omits it entirely from his divisions of knowledge elsewhere.

Those divisions later became the basis for a systematic reconstruction of Aristotelian thought in which metaphysics was featured, if at all, as something of an embarrassment.³³ Some writers frankly conceded that it was not a science at all, but an amalgam of sciences. Among them was Richard Crakanthorpe, author of an influential seventeenth-century introduction to metaphysics, who began by parcelling the subject up into theology, ousiology, pneumatology, and other disparate topics.³⁴ Others tried to bolster its integrity by glossing the question of being as the question of substance. Following Aristotle's own lead, this bound metaphysics more tightly to logic, by linking it to the exploration of substance and the other categories in Aristotle's *Organon*. In this spirit, Crakanthorpe's introduction later found itself appended to his weightier textbook on logic, as a supplement which bestowed on logic a fresh metaphysical importance.

Before returning to the relationship between metaphysics and logic in the final part of this essay, it is worth noting, with Aristotle, that substance is not the only way to talk about being. Being is spoken of in four ways, he explains: as substance; as accident; as what is true; and, beyond all these, as 'being-in-potentiality and being-in-actuality' (E2, 1026a33-b2). Aristotle's word for actuality, energeia, is, if not a new word, then a familiar word used in a new way.³⁵ Just as novel is the word translated here as 'potentiality', dynamis. As it happens, two alternative translations appear in the first two stanzas of Cowley and Crashaw's 'On Hope'. 'The Fates have not a possibility / Of blessing thee', Cowley argues; Crashaw responds that 'Fates cannot find out a capacity / For hurting thee'. It is as though Crashaw has spotted the Greek original behind his friend's word, and matched it with his own, equally obtrusive expression, in the same position in the line. 'Possibility' and 'capacity' belong to the constellation of terms surrounding the concept of dynamis, and together they draw these poems into a distinctive Aristotelian problematic.³⁶ That problematic, for which dynamis is touted as the solution, is—roughly

speaking—the task of reconciling being with change, and thus of recognizing the abiding but impossible dependence of being on non-being. In Aristotle’s thought, that dependence bends the notion of being to its breaking point, but represents the only way that being might be thinkable at all, and registers, from within the philosophical tradition, the simultaneous hazard and necessity of hope.

3

After featuring in Aristotle’s earlier analysis of being, the doublet of dynamis and energeia vanishes from the Metaphysics until Book Θ. The purpose of Aristotle’s hylomorphic account of substance is to allow for an account of change; but it is only here, with the fuller analysis of dynamis, usually rendered as ‘capacity’ or ‘potentiality’, that the mechanics of change are analyzed. Among the term’s various meanings, the central idea is that a capacity is the starting point for change. When something comes to be, it moves from potentiality to actuality; before it actually exists, its being is only potential; whatever is potential might or might not end up existing. This argument faces criticism from both sides. On one side is the position that, conceptually, dynamis is either incoherent or unnecessary. For this position, which Aristotle associates with the School of Megara, ‘something can be only when it actually is, and whenever it is not actively in existence, it is not capable either’ (Θ3, 1046b29-30). By this reasoning, a capacity is present only when it is being actualized. Ultimately, Aristotle claims, this freezes reality into a closed and perfect whole. If what exists cannot be otherwise, then whatever does not exist at present cannot and will not exist. In dispensing with dynamis, these opponents ‘do away with both movement and becoming’—‘no small thing’, Aristotle drily remarks (Θ3, 1047a14). Behind the Megarians, in Aristotle’s mind, stands his old enemy, Parmenides, who held that being was logically and ontologically incompatible with change. Yet having introduced

dynamis as a force in the world, Aristotle sets strict limits on this explosive new concept, for fear of tending too far to the other extreme. Dynamis is only meaningful, he insists, when determined in advance by its relation to actuality; and actuality is prior in virtually every way. Aristotle thus presents a critique of empty possibility from the standpoint of being, all the time accepting that, without access to something beyond being, metaphysics recedes into an endorsement of whatever happens to exist. His account is an attempt to forge a path between the perfect night of potentiality on one side, and the equally mythic eternal noon of immanence on the other. The result is an astoundingly contorted formulation: ‘For of the things that do not exist, some exist in dynamis; but they do not exist, because they do not exist in fulfilment’.³⁷

With statements like that, Book Θ shows philosophy reaching its limits: confronted with the task of apprehending what does not quite exist, what cannot quite be known, and yet what must be posited if movement is not to stop altogether. Potentiality is, as it were, the dark matter of being. It marks the rift between a thing and itself. Within it lurks the suggestion that between the object and the concept of being there is, as yet, no reconciliation—that what passes as being is unworthy of the name, and that the abstraction of being, over and against particular beings, exerts a predominance at once violent and false. At stake in the positing of dynamis is therefore not only the hierarchical order of Aristotle’s metaphysics, but the very possibility of metaphysical thought itself. According to a more conservative reading of Book Θ., the measure of what might happen is always the past: either because capacities are themselves deposits of prior actualities, or because current possibility can only be inferred via precedent. Yet it is by tethering potentiality so closely to its actualization that Aristotle elucidates its dependence on certain material conditions. Potentiality is always the potentiality for something, at some time, in some way; for rational beings, it likewise depends on a degree of choice (Θ5, 1047b35-48). With

this, the history that had been emptied out of actuality—as merely an extrapolation or a repetition of the past—rushes back in. Potentiality is revealed as a historical category, naturally bound up with space, time, and human desire. What is possible at any given time is overlaid with what might be possible under different circumstances; the two are inextricable, such that the most realistic analysis of the present requires the long perspective of an open future. From that perspective, the relationship between potentiality and actuality is itself seen as infused with unactualized and almost inconceivable potential.³⁸ One name for that perspective, one of its tempers, is hope.

Hope, then, may well be one proper mood of metaphysical thinking: an attitude towards the world which holds fast to its unactualized possibility, including the possibility for happiness. It comes closer to the need by which that thinking is impelled, even against itself, than does the anxiety in which the contingency of existence washes over the mind and renders it powerless.³⁹ Aristotle speaks of hope in various ways, always in passing: as a spur to deliberation; as a component of passions like anger and fear; even, in a much-repeated definition recorded by Diogenes Laertius, as a kind of ‘waking dream’.⁴⁰ Dynamis is not hope’s equivalent, but it may be one of its ciphers, at least in the realm of metaphysics—one of the cracks in the order of being, in which a future almost inconceivably far from the hitherto existing might find shelter. Certainly, for metaphysical writers after Aristotle, hope represents one way in which possibility is scanned in the present. According to Aquinas’s account, hope directs itself towards a future good at once difficult and possible; yet the possible, we have seen, is a moving target.⁴¹ Later in the tradition, meanwhile, metaphysics comes up against hope most often in questioning its own claim to exist. Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason takes aim at the presumptions of dogmatic metaphysics by redrawing the boundaries within which reason can be gainfully employed; yet

this is also an act of salvage, aimed at releasing the more hesitant motives congealed within metaphysical ideas, and reorienting them towards the practical transformation of reality. Divested of substantiality, metaphysics assumes either the negative character of dissatisfaction with the phenomenal world—felt as the irresistible lure towards, and beyond, its acceptable limits—or the consciously hypothetical, even fictive, character of a set of postulates (God, heaven, the immortality of the soul) by means of which, perhaps solely by means of which, that world might be changed. Kant demands that metaphysics renounce its theoretical sovereignty and pass into the realm of action, to resurface, not as a doctrine, but as a question: what may I hope?⁴² By the time that question makes it through the charnel house of the twentieth century, though, it has lost some of its confidence: metaphysics must address not what, but whether, I may hope. This is the question that pulses through the thinking of Theodor Adorno, especially his later work, as it carries forward the double imperative of critique and salvage Kant bequeathed to metaphysics.⁴³ If metaphysics is to be justified, if (in Cowley's words) it is to be 'any thing or no', it is only through the same complex of negativity and semblance. Negativity leads metaphysics towards a critical position on reality that sustains itself through ruthless self-criticism. Semblance leads it towards the self-confessed frailty of the artwork, which can show the truth only by disclaiming its capacity for truth and conceding its ontological status as mere show.

Remote though this excursus may seem from the poems of Cowley and Crashaw, it helps to frame the stakes, philosophical and literary, of their exchange, by posing the question of what it might mean to give voice to hope. Hope is the verso of thinking; sensible not in the enthusiasm of thought but in its aporiai, in the checks and halts of its movement, in the continual falling short which is the principle of its motion and the premise for its continuing. It is that impulse that

refuses to halt before what exists, but refuses equally to endorse the idées trouvées that present themselves as alternatives—least of all the forms in which hope might come to rest in existence. For latent in Aquinas’s definition of hope is the risk that the present subsumes and cancels this future good—that, in St Paul’s terms, hope exchanges the things which are not seen for the things which are (2 Corinthians 4:18). Only by resisting this false equivalence can hope remain hope. And so there is something wilful and critical in its insubstantiality, something that equally slips past the usual forms of articulation. As, in the Metaphysics, dynamis drove Aristotle into ever more tortuous expressions for being, so hope may demand new strategies for writing. This might illustrate better the equivocation in Cowley’s apparently deflationary account of hope. It reveals the nature of this exchange, less as a contest of pro et contra arguments, and more as a shared exploration of hope’s internal dialectic. As his response in The Mistress, ‘For Hope’, testifies, Cowley can speak up for hope as well as against it. What emerges from Steps to the Temple is the thought that speaking up for hope may also involve speaking against it: that renouncing hope might be the condition for rediscovering it elsewhere. Against the current of its argument, Cowley’s poem presents a case for hope against hope—resisting its affirmative temptations so as to grapple with the problems it poses for expression. Reading the poem like this involves approaching it, not as metaphysics, but as poetry, but in such a way that this divergence opens up another of their affinities. If metaphysics is to harbor a hope for and against existence, then its own self-correction must be somehow audible in every metaphysical utterance. What is required is a new way of reading those utterances, one that is attuned to the possibilities latent within them. That way of reading may be found in the gap poetry opens up between the literal and the potential. The remainder of this essay return to Cowley’s poem on

hope with an ear out for that gap, to sound out the distinctive form of predication of which poetry is singularly capable, and for whose sake metaphysics passes into poetry.

4

In situating Cowley's poem within the longer tradition of metaphysical thought, do we risk taking its reasoning too seriously? This is the crucial question of this essay, and the answer—in a sense—is yes. Metaphysical poetry works reason close to the point of nervous collapse, by turning it to ends that are salacious or repulsive or violent. It does so not to misappropriate logical operations for flagrantly extraneous interests, perhaps, so much as to determine what interests and investments might be harbored within those operations to begin with. Thus, in traversing the rhetorical and logical topoi, metaphysical poets find, in the yoking of heterogeneous ideas, a genuine affective tenderness—especially, as Katrin Ettenhuber has shown, in poems of valediction, whose conceptual tenuity bespeaks the passionate sympathy required to endure scenes of parting.⁴⁴ And the more outrageous the paralogisms of these poets' reasoning, the deeper they probe the capacities of reason as such. They play the role Donne ascribes to his Paradoxes, as 'rather alarums to truth to arme her then enemies': either by courting listeners' instinctual recoil and goading it into a counterargument, or by forcing them to reflect upon the ease with which logic went astray.⁴⁵ With respect to reason, metaphysical poetry embraces the simultaneous task of critique and salvage. If we are wary of taking its reasoning too seriously, we might wonder just how seriously reason itself should be taken: a question posed not only by metaphysical poetry, but by metaphysics itself.

Yet there is still a tension between the ways in which poetry and philosophy argue, and an abiding doubt whether poetry is right for arguing at all. In the to and fro of their disputation, Cowley and Crashaw's poems find themselves negotiating the linguistic interferences that begin

to crackle when poetry comes too close to philosophy. And it is by exposing itself to these interferences that Cowley's poem in particular proves so unusually and daringly metaphysical. In picking a way through the zone between being and nothingness, under fire from both sides, Cowley moves towards a different grammar of positing, akin to the indistinct ontology of its subject: at once an assertion, and not an assertion, about something that is both a being and not a being. It is not that such statements 'overcome' logic, or grammar, by escaping the violations of reason. It is rather that, by exaggerating the apparatus of logical argument, they move reason into another scene, one no less marked by its dialectic, but capable nonetheless of illuminating the violence it does.

Derided by Hobbes and other wags as naturally repugnant to reason, metaphysics was often considered so fundamental to reasoning as to be virtually identical with logic. What they have in common is, precisely, everything: they are concerned with everything that exists. According to the scholastic tradition epitomized by Suárez, both deal with what it is for something—anything—to be that thing: logic, insofar as this concerns how we think about it; metaphysics, insofar as this concerns its objective essence.⁴⁶ As a result, metaphysics and logic were regular partners in early modern thought, not least in university textbooks like the one by Crakanthorpe we saw earlier. That proximity likewise called attention to their shared pursuit of a philosophical language, as both a means of doing philosophy and an index to the underlying structure of reality. Hence, in the Metaphysics, Aristotle precedes his search for substance with a defence of the principle of non-contradiction, the idea that something cannot be and not be something else. As a principle which 'everyone must know to know anything', and which 'everyone must have who knows anything about being' (Γ3, 1005b11-18), the principle of non-contradiction is ontological and logical at once. It shows how logical definitions can be torqued

to offer metaphysical insight into the things themselves. Metaphysics implies a grammar, such that for Aristotle, the way we speak about being can help tell us what it is. Yet the entrance of dynamis puts this grammar under increasing strain, in proving somehow impervious to conceptual thought. Speaking about an existence suffused with potentiality means speaking of what could always be otherwise. Hence, Aristotle admits, in a breathtaking concession, sensuous particulars are simply impossible to define, ‘because they have matter, whose nature is such that it can potentially be or not be’ (Z15, 1039b29-30). Speaking about potentiality in itself, meanwhile, involves crediting what does not exist with a certain kind of being. Hence the challenge of expressing how things exist under the sign of possibility, where language extends beyond the ban on contradiction: as more than nothing, but less than full being.

All of which means that subtleties of being like hope require special forms and moods of language. Before Cowley has even unfurled the logical dilemma of his poem’s opening stanza, he finds himself in the metaphysical conundrum of speaking about of what does not exist:

Hope, whose weake being ruin’d is
Alike, If it succeed, and if it misse.
Whom Ill, and Good doth equally confound,
And both the hornes of Fates dilemma wound.

Vaine shadow! that doth vanish quite
Both at full noone, and perfect night.
The Fates have not a possibility
Of blessing thee.

If things then from their ends wee happy call,
’Tis hope is the most hopelesse thing of all.

For an opening salvo against hope's 'weake being', the first couplet of Cowley's poem is, ironically, rather weak. The 'being' of hope is not quite strong enough to sustain the beat of a rhythmically unsettled line, not quite enough of a noun to exclude the hint of a participle. To some degree, its weakness merely mimics its subject; yet that weakness spreads from the subject of the condemnation to its argument. When 'Alike' arrives in the second line, it is with a thud, because, in the momentary hesitance that checks the enjambment, that first line has already formulated itself as an independent assertion. According to that formulation, hope's 'weake being' is the underlying subject of the subclause—its substance, even—and 'ruin'd' its property. Binding them together, but left till the end of the line, is is. The peculiarity of the word derives from its not really adding anything to its subject: that weak being should be ruined, at least in the sense of 'ruinous', is nothing new. But it also derives from its emphasis at the end of the line, its imperfect rhyme with the softer 'misse', and above all, the fact that, for Cowley, hope is barely anything at all. Hope's weak being is ruined, Cowley means to say; but what he says is that hope's weak being, ruined, is. Talking about a non-being like hope involves predication; but predication invests what is not with a kind of being, however weak, however ruined.

This has been alleged as the founding error of metaphysics, its speculations about being diagnosed as overinterpretations of the copula. In the Latin text of Leviathan, Hobbes blames Aristotle for the metaphysical perversity of generating essence, entity, essentiality, and similar monstrosities, from the copula, by way of a scandalous copulationem Nominum.⁴⁷ But the shakiness of Cowley's predication has connections in the realm of poetics as well. The inversion of 'ruin'd is' is the most ordinary thing in the world, unremarkable in its manipulation of syntax for reasons of rhyme. Yet by drawing statements under the heteronomous influence of form,

poetry suggests that they may not be quite as assertive as they once were. The clearest acknowledgement of this comes from a very different poet, Philip Sidney, in his Defence of

Poetry:

Now for the poet, he nothing affirms, and therefore never lieth. For, as I take it, to lie is to affirm that to be true which is false. So as the other artists, and especially the historian, affirming many things, can, in the cloudy knowledge of mankind, hardly escape from many lies. But the poet (as I said before) never affirmeth [...] And therefore, though he recount things not true, yet because he telleth them not for true, he lieth not[.]⁴⁸

For Sidney, as for other imaginative Aristotelians, defining poetry as a mimēsis—in his gloss, ‘a representing, counterfeiting, or figuring forth’—rendered it in some sense incommensurable with the other sciences.⁴⁹ The result was a rupture: on one side philosophy, however versed in poetic technique; on the other, poetry, however stocked with philosophical argument. In the Preface to his 1656 Poems, Cowley simply rebuts the charge Sidney is parrying: ‘There is not so great a Lye to be found in any Poet’, he thunders, ‘as the vulgar conceit of men, that Lying is Essential to good Poetry’.⁵⁰ The more philosophical poetry becomes, however, the more these misgivings grow: that even the most bullish pronouncements are counterfeit, that even the rigor of the most concerted argumentation is merely the representation of rigor. Under the spell of semblance, philosophical contents find themselves unable to signify literally, unable to prove, or conclude, or even affirm. Crucially, though, this challenge to philosophical predication answers to something within philosophy itself, and within metaphysics especially, to the rift Aristotle detects between what can and cannot be known of an object. From the standpoint of potentiality, any statement about anything must acknowledge the latent capacity of how that thing might exist

in a wholly different way. Nowhere is this truer than for shadowy beings like hope. Hope cannot be affirmed or denied without falsifying its tenuous claim on existence; but that claim finds its expression in the equally tenuous realm of poetry, whose propositions disclaim the right to affirm or deny.

Before the stanza is out, Cowley has changed tack. The ‘Hope’ with which he begins is never attached to a main verb, as though the experience of two subclauses is enough to test and expose the problems of such a predication. Instead, retroactively, it becomes an apostrophe—to the ‘Vaine shadow’ that vanishes as soon as it is addressed, the ‘thee’ to whom Cowley denies all possibility of blessing. Crashaw enthusiastically adopts the technique in his response, tilting the poem from third to second person: ‘Deare Hope! Earths dowry, and Heavens debt, / The entity of things that are not yet’ (Steps, 96). The poem begins to fill up with exclamations and exclamation marks (Crashaw’s signature punctuation). And by the time Cowley returns to the fray, in his second stanza, hope’s being is all but given:

Hope, thou bold taster of delight,
Who, in stead of doing so, devour’st it quite.
Thou bring’st us an estate, yet leav’st us poore,
By clogging it with Legacies before.
The joyes, which wee intire should wed,
Come deflour’d virgins to our bed.
Good fortunes without gaine imported bee,
So mighty Custome’s paid to thee.
For joy, like Wine kept close doth better taste:
If it take ayre before, its spirits waste.

For the opening stanza's metaphysical footwork, Cowley exchanges a nervy shuffle of conceits. Hope is a voracious taster, a prodigal testator, a premarital rapist, an exacting customs official; by the time it is the air that spoils the wine, it could hardly be less ethereal. The disputation *on* hope becomes an appeal *to* hope. For Crashaw especially, the language of apostrophe provides a means of calling on hope without presuming to capture or—Cowley's word—'confound' it. It seems to elude the ontological grammar by which hope would be or not be, subsumed into being or relegated as nothing, and allows it instead to be both at once. And as such, it seems to offer a response to the charge of violence so often levelled against metaphysics, and metaphysical poetry too. Yet replacing predication with invocation, in the hope of maintaining hope's otherness, bestows a mythic but indisputable being on something whose being is precisely what is in question.⁵¹ Suspended uneasily between two ways of talking about hope, between the second and third person, 'On Hope' is left to figure out their uneasy cohabitation. If metaphysics seeks to avert its own violent tendencies, it is not by renouncing its own grammar, but by translating it into semblance, and accepting the suspension of its own claim to knowing. Only under such conditions can entities as frail as hope be spoken of with the requisite frailty: their being ruined, their cloudiness undispelled.

5

If this is what metaphysics looks like in poetry, then what about hope? How can poetry hope, in new and different ways from philosophy? The answer lies, once again, in the opening lines of Cowley's poem, listened to this time in the company of Samuel Johnson. Remarking on Cowley's versification, Johnson complained that his rhymes are 'very often made by pronouns or particles, or the like unimportant words, which disappoint the ear, and destroy the energy of the

line' ('Cowley', 231). In the opening stanza against hope, this was precisely their purpose: to dissipate the fervor of the line, to lean on the word is, and so to remind us that, metaphysically speaking, no word could be less unimportant. But the disappointment of Johnson's ear serves as a reminder of how far criticism depends on hope. The language of poetic 'expectations', the looser and more furtive counterpart to 'conventions', has itself become conventional, to the point that the hesitance of expectation, its complex of hope and doubt, has been all but forgotten. Reading poetry, though, is in effect a protracted act of expectancy. It requires the plotting-out of a poem's time scheme, a way of joining its pasts, presents, and futures, by means of the formal and generic patterns it gradually discloses. Those patterns mark time and mete it out. As such, they have been crucial for metaphysical investigations of time since, in his Confessions, Augustine chose a verse from a hymn he remembered to illustrate the telling of time, a mnemotechnic correlative to the human consciousness in which time existed. Before those poetic expectations are established, though, there is a process of expecting, which risks disappearing into the expectations it will later produce, just as, for Cowley, hope vanishes into its accomplished object. In seeking the bonum and futurum, difficult yet possible, hope is bound up with time. The future towards which it opens is an effect of the potentiality, the dynamis, that remains unexpended in the present, and the material through which change is possible. In reflecting on hope's temporal character, these poems are reflecting their own temporal medium, the capacities and possibilities through which they exist.

They are also entering distinctively metaphysical terrain. In his Physics, Aristotle wondered whether time really existed, and began by suspecting that it may not. 'Part of it has been and is not, while part will be and is not yet. Yet out of these time is composed, both infinite time and any given duration'.⁵² Nor is the present any more fixed, as merely the momentary

border between past and future. Time thus seemed to be a peculiar entity of which no part could be said to exist. In the Aristotelian tradition, this blossomed into the metaphysical question of entia successiva—whether there were beings that did not, and could never, exist all at once, like time and motion.⁵³ It is this question Crashaw evokes in hailing hope as ‘[t]he entity of things that are not yet’. ‘By thee’, he writes,

Wee are not where, or what wee bee,
But what, and where wee would bee: thus art thou
Our absent presence, and our future now.

(Steps, 98)

This chronic distraction, and the breach it opens in consciousness, might be a cue for a self-examination in the manner of Augustine. Cowley takes it this way: hope is an unachievable end, inflaming ‘Chymicks’ and ‘Lovers’ alike, ‘Still leading them insensibly on, / With the strange witchcraft of Anon’ (Steps, 98). For Crashaw, though, hope also offers an escape from time. Revising Cowley’s image of hope as the greedy taster, Crashaw praises it in other terms:

Faire Hope! our earlier Heaven! by thee
Young Time is taster to Eternity.

(Steps, 98)

This juncture between time and eternity was sometimes paralleled within theology by the juncture between hope and faith, with hope as the modality through which faith is lived. Yet as such, hope is also treated as a drive whose object is determined by faith, its practical inclination towards happiness subsumed in faith’s knowledge of truth. And while, for Aquinas, faith had scoped out hope’s object as possible, for some seventeenth-century writers, it secured it as certain. While ‘in regard of our sense and apprehension, Hope is not always certain’, considered

Richard Ward, 'Hope considered absolutely, and in it self, is also infallible and certain'; the Cambridge Platonist Nathanael Culverwel split things otherwise, distinguishing Christian hope from its pagan counterpart as 'a waiting and expectation of a certain good'.⁵⁴

Put like this, the temporal core of hope, the futurity that gives it strength to hold out against actuality, is resolved into the timeless knowledge of faith; and the present takes hold of the future. When Crashaw talks of hope as 'our future now', either word could act as the noun, pulling the future into the present or subordinating the present to an eternal future. His hope knows what it wants, and knows that it will get it. His poem follows a similarly self-assured pattern, the one set out in advance by Cowley. Cowley's poem is more disconcerting in its form. Four stanzas of ten lines, usually between four and five beats long, it nonetheless has a habit of knocking its reader off balance. Take the middle lines of the first stanza:

Vaine shadow! that doth vanish quite
Both at full noone, and perfect night.
The Fates have not a possibility
Of blessing thee.

Nowhere else in the poem is there a line as short as this last one. Equivalent positions in other stanzas are filled out with four whole beats; this one has barely two; it is briefer than the single (Aristotelian) word 'possibility' with which it rhymes. The couplet after recovers its poise with a neat logical precision: 'If things then from their ends wee happy call, / 'Tis hope is the most hopelesse thing of all'. But the memory of that aural lurch into nothing hangs around even into subsequent stanzas. Time jumps; expectation falters; and its self-possession gives way to a divested but resurgent passion for unexpected possibility.⁵⁵ This, I suggest, is what it is like to hope in poetry. The expectancy of reading comes into view only before expectation has been

formed, or after it has been frustrated. Hope thus wells up in the gaps of form, in negative, as what carries on through the poem's rhythmic stutters; and in this, it appears to some as a poetic defect. So, Johnson censured Cowley for the 'uncertainty and looseness of his measures', especially in his later odes; what these poems lacked, he felt, was a 'constant return of the same numbers', through which they might achieve a 'smoothness of transition and continuity of thought' ('Cowley', 222). Cowley anticipated just this charge in the preface to his 1656 Poems, leaving the 'various and irregular' verses of his Pindarics 'wholly at the Mercy of the Reader' (Poems, (b)1^v). Johnson longs for poetry to take care of cultivating and satisfying expectation, according to the certa fides that remained his religious and aesthetic desideratum.⁵⁶ Cowley solicits in his readers, instead, an active but fallible discernment, a hope without certainty.

But hope appears in other ways through Cowley's poem too, amidst the heap of conceits with which he and Crashaw pursue their argument. We saw in his poem's second stanza the quickfire flurry with which hope was presented in now one, now another guise. As further arguments are cited and further images adduced, the older ones are left to show themselves out. Instead, they remain in the peripheries of vision, as a sort of unconscious stirring beneath the conscious logic of the poem, forming tacit connectives with their precedents and successors. And together, they form, despite themselves, a logic and a temporality of their own. The effect is clearest in the third stanza, where Cowley insists on the disjunct of hope and reason:

Fond Archer Hope, who tak'st thine ayme so farre,

That still, or short, or wide thine arrowes are.

Thine empty cloud the eye, it selfe deceives

With shapes that our owne fancie gives:

A cloud, which gilt, and painted now appeares,

But must drop presently in teares.
When thy false beames o're Reasons light prevaile,
By ignes fatui, not North starres we sayle.

(Steps, 97)

Cowley warns against the ignes fatui of hope, just as, earlier, we heard his friend Thomas Hobbes warn against the ignis fatuus of 'Metaphysical subtilties'. Both hope and metaphysics threaten the clear sight and steady voyage of reason; both are as cloudy as each other, as precariously placed between being and nothing. In Renaissance art, Rachel Eisendrath observes, clouds grew increasingly vaporous, tenuous, and thus suggestive; so too, this 'empty cloud' captures the same dialectic she notices, holding together the 'faraway' and the 'it-could-be-otherwise'.⁵⁷ It may be mere semblance, a projection of subjective 'fancie', but it is nonetheless capable of receiving the imagination's gilding and painting and retaining them in some sort of substance. And the passage's final lines remain suspended in the temporal hiatus between this subjective projection and its failure. The image in the clouds still appears, 'now'. It will dissolve, 'presently', but not presently enough to dissolve in the present, and not soon enough for it to depart the poem's field of vision. Even once these images are passed over, and the argument moves on, they linger in the retina. In the gap that opens between hope and existence, present and future, the reader's attention is held by a vision which 'must drop presently in teares', but which is no less captivating for its transience. Between the semblance of hope and its negation emerges a brief moment of happiness: powerless, perhaps, but over which the alternatives of fate's dilemma have no power.

¹A version of this argument was presented at the *Renaissance Society of America* conference, April 2022; I am grateful to the attendees in that panel, and all the panels on ‘Materialism and Metaphysics’, for such invigorating discussions. For their comments on earlier drafts, I am grateful to Namratha Rao, Raphael Lyne, Christopher Pye, Tessa Peres, and especially Tim Harrison. I am also grateful to Julia Carne for help in the writing.

Theodor W. Adorno, Negative Dialectics, trans. E.B. Ashton (London: Routledge, 1973), 381; translation altered.

² Samuel Johnson, ‘Cowley’, in The Lives of the Poets, ed. Roger Lonsdale, 4 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 1.213; further references given in parentheses in the text.

³ T. S. Eliot, Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry: The Clark Lectures at Trinity College, Cambridge, 1926 and The Turnbull Lectures at The Johns Hopkins University, 1933, ed. Ronald Schuchard (London: Faber and Faber, 1993), 190; Metaphysical Poetry, ed. Colin Burrow (London: Penguin, 2006), xxix-xxx. David Rawlinson purports to defend Cowley against his detractors, but his faint praise is equally damning: ‘Cowley and the Current Status of Metaphysical Poetry’, Essays in Criticism 13.4 (1963), 323-40.

⁴ See especially the essays in Royalists and Royalism in 17th-Century Literature: Exploring Abraham Cowley, ed. Philip Major (New York: Routledge, 2020).

⁵ Richard Crashaw, Steps to the Temple. Sacred Poems, With other Delights of the MUSES (London, 1646), 96; in this essay, texts of both Cowley’s and Crashaw’s poems are taken from this edition, and abbreviated in parentheses as Steps.

⁶ Clarence H. Miller, ‘The Order of Stanzas in Cowley and Crashaw’s “Of Hope”’, Studies in Philology 61.1 (1964), 64. For a contrary reading of Crashaw’s response, as bypassing the higher authority of theology, see Andrew Sean Davidson, ‘Devotio and Ratio in Richard Crashaw’s “On Hope”’, John Donne Journal 20 (2001), 243-61.

⁷ Edmund Elys, Divine Poems (London, 1659), A3^v.

⁸ Christopher Wyvill, Certaine Serious Thoughts (London, 1647), 26; Nathanael Richards, Poems Sacred and Satyricall (London, 1641), 133.

⁹ For these conceptual equivocations plotted as literary history, see Adam Potkay, Hope: A Literary History (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), especially 29-166.

- ¹⁰ John Dryden, Discourse concerning the Original and Progress of Satire, in The Works of John Dryden, Volume 4: Poems 1693-1696, ed. A. B. Chambers, William Frost, and Vinton A. Dearing (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), 7.
- ¹¹ John Cleveland, 'The Hecatomb to his Mistress', l. 81, in The Poems of John Cleveland, ed. Brian Morris and Eleanor Withington (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967).
- ¹² William Drummond, 'A Letter on the True Nature of Poetry, Addressed to Dr. Arthur Johnston', in William Drummond of Hawthornden: Poems and Prose, ed. Robert H. MacDonald (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1976), 191.
- ¹³ Gordon Teskey, 'The Metaphysics of the Metaphysicals', in John Donne in Context, ed. Michael Schoenfeldt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 236-46; James Kuzner, The Form of Love: Poetry's Quarrel with Philosophy (New York: Fordham University Press, 2021); Wendy Beth Hyman, Impossible Desire and the Limits of Knowledge in Renaissance Poetry (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019). See also Andrew Cutrofello, 'How Do We Recognize Metaphysical Poetry?', in The Insistence of Art: Aesthetic Philosophy After Early Modernity, ed. Paul A. Kottman (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), 77-90.
- ¹⁴ See Mordechai Feingold, 'The Humanities', in The History of the University of Oxford, Volume IV: Seventeenth-Century Oxford, ed. Nicholas Tyacke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 211-357; and Richard Serjeantson, 'Becoming a Philosopher in Seventeenth-Century Britain', in The Oxford Handbook of British Philosophy in the Seventeenth Century, ed. Peter R. Anstey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 9-29.
- ¹⁵ For an overview, see Charles B. Schmitt, John Case and Aristotelianism in Renaissance England (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1983), 13-76.
- ¹⁶ Amidst a spate of recent work on Suárez, see especially Interpreting Suárez: Critical Essays, ed. Daniel Schwartz (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); and A Companion to Francisco Suárez, ed. Victor M. Salas and Robert L. Fastiggi (Leiden: Brill, 2015).
- ¹⁷ See Walter Sparr, Wiederkehr der Metaphysik: Die ontologische Frage in der lutherischen Theologie des frühen 17. Jahrhunderts (Stuttgart: Calwer, 1976).
- ¹⁸ For a general overview, see Charles H. Lohr, 'Metaphysics and natural philosophy as sciences: the Catholic and Protestant views in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries', in Philosophy in the Sixteenth and

Seventeenth Centuries: Conversations with Aristotle, ed. Constance Blackwell and Sachiko Kusukawa (Farnham: Ashgate, 1999), 280-95.

¹⁹ See H. F. Fletcher, The Intellectual Development of John Milton, 2 vols (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1956), 2.641.

²⁰ William Chillingworth, The Religion of Protestants. A Safe Way to Salvation (Oxford, 1638), §§§2^v.

²¹ For precedents and imitators of Chillingworth's image, see Peter Harrison, 'Angels on Pinheads and Needles' Points', Notes and Queries 63.1 (2016), 45-47.

²² Thomas Hobbes, Elements of Philosophy, The First Section, Concerning Body (London, 1656), 79.

²³ Thomas Hobbes, Leviathan, ed. Noel Malcolm, 4 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2012), 3.1076.

²⁴ Thomas Sprat, The History of the Royal-Society of London, For the Improving of Natural Knowledge (London, 1667), 2S3^v.

²⁵ Abraham Cowley, Poems (London, 1656), 3F4^r; further references given in parentheses.

²⁶ Abraham Cowley, 'To the Royal Society', in Sprat, History, B1^v.

²⁷ 'Of Agriculture', in The Works of Mr. Abraham Cowley (London, 1674), N3^r.

²⁸ This is amply chronicled in Robert Pasnau, Metaphysical Themes 1274-1671 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

²⁹ Marco Sgarbi, The Aristotelian Tradition and the Rise of British Empiricism: Logic and Epistemology in the British Isles (1570-1689) (Dordrecht: Springer, 2013); while Sgarbi concentrates on Zabarella and the Paduan school, in Metaphysical Themes, Pasnau observes a broader shift of interest in scholastic thought from metaphysical to physical interpretations of Aristotle.

³⁰ Earl Miner, The Metaphysical Mode from Donne to Cowley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 112.

³¹ In this way, the history of metaphysics is a question of metaphysics itself, not something extraneous to its development: see A. W. Moore, The Evolution of Modern Metaphysics: Making Sense of Things (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

³² Aristotle, Metaphysica, ed. Werner Jaeger (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957); all translations from this text are my own.

³³ For this forgetting of metaphysics, see Pierre Aubenque, Le problème de l'être chez Aristote: Essai sur la problématique aristotélicienne (Paris: Quadrige, 1962), 21-44.

³⁴ Richard Crakanthorpe, Introductio in Metaphysicam (Oxford, 1619), 3-4. Whether metaphysics was a coherent science was regularly debated by medieval philosophers too: see Rega Wood, ‘The Subject of the Aristotelian Science of Metaphysics’, in The Cambridge History of Medieval Philosophy, ed. Robert Pasnau in association with Christine van Dyke, revised edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 609-21.

³⁵ See Jonathan Beere, Doing and Being: An Interpretation of Aristotle’s ‘Metaphysics’ Theta (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 155-68.

³⁶ Nominally, Aristotle excludes ‘possibility’ from the relevant meanings of dynamis, as merely equivocal: Δ12, 1019b23-34. As Charlotte Witt notes, however, his later critique of the Megarians relies on just this equivocation: Witt, Ways of Being: Potentiality and Actuality in Aristotle’s Metaphysics (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 17-37.

³⁷ ‘τῶν γὰρ μὴ ὄντων ἓνια δυνάμει ἐστίν· οὐκ ἔστι δέ, ὅτι οὐκ ἐντελεχεία ἐστίν’: Θ3, 1047b1-2.

³⁸ Something like this is the argument of Ernst Bloch’s The Principle of Hope, trans. Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice, and Paul Knight, 3 vols (Oxford: Blackwell, 1.6). Bloch credits Aristotle as the philosopher who first made actuality into a philosophical category, if not an explicit problem, and Metaphysics Θ as attempting ‘to do justice from afar to the disruptions, perhaps even aporias of realization’: 1.191.

³⁹ See Martin Heidegger, ‘What is Metaphysics?’, in Basic Writings, ed. David Farrell Krell (London: Routledge, 1978), 41-57.

⁴⁰ See Diogenes Laertius, ‘Aristotle’, 5.1.18, in Lives of Eminent Philosophers, trans. R. D. Hicks, 2 vols (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1925).

⁴¹ Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologiae, II.i.40.1. Those four aspects of hope’s object—good, future, difficult, and possible—are regularly rehearsed in early modern accounts.

⁴² Immanuel Kant, Critique of Pure Reason, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), A805/B833 (p. 677).

⁴³ This account is condensed from the final section of Adorno’s Negative Dialectics, the ‘Meditations on Metaphysics’—an allusion to Husserl’s Cartesian Meditations and, through him, Descartes’s Meditations, first translated into French in 1647 as Méditations métaphysiques.

⁴⁴ Katrin Ettenhuber, “‘Comparisons are Odious’? Revisiting the Metaphysical Conceit in Donne’, Review of English Studies 63.255 (2010), 393-413.

⁴⁵ John Donne, letter to ?Sir Henry Wotton (?1600), quoted in John Donne: Paradoxes and Problems, ed. Helen Peters (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), xxvi.

⁴⁶ See Francisco Suárez, A Commentary on Aristotle's 'Metaphysics', trans. John P. Doyle (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2004), 123. For the relationship between logic and metaphysical poetry, see Katrin Ettenhuber, 'Sex and the Disjunctive Syllogism: The Logic of Love in Donne's Poetry', ELH 86.3 (2019), 639-68.

⁴⁷ Hobbes, Leviathan, 3.1081.

⁴⁸ Philip Sidney, A Defence of Poetry, in Miscellaneous Prose of Sir Philip Sidney, ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones and Jan van Dorsten (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 102-3.

⁴⁹ Sidney, Defence, 79-80.

⁵⁰ Cowley, 'The Preface', in Poems (London, 1656), b2^v.

⁵¹ This charge is most famously explored in Jacques Derrida, 'Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas', in Writing and Difference, trans. Alan Bass (London, Routledge, 1978): 97-192. There, Derrida cites Emmanuel Levinas's fantasy of a 'nonviolent language' which could escape from predication—'the first violence'—through 'pure invocation, pure adoration, proffering only proper nouns in order to call to the other from afar'. But he is sceptical: 'Would such a language still deserve its name?' (p. 184).

⁵² Aristotle, Physics, ed. P. H. Wicksteed and F. M. Cornford, 2 vols (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957), IV.x, 218a1-3; my translation.

⁵³ See Pasnau, Metaphysical Themes, 374-98. For an overview of seventeenth-century British philosophers on time, see Emily Thomas, Absolute Time: Rifts in Early Modern Metaphysics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 13-30.

⁵⁴ Richard Ward, The Chiefest Divine Vertues Epitomized (London, 1655), 118-19; Nathanael Culverwel, 'The White Stone: Or, a Learned and Choice Treatise of Assurance', in An Elegant and Learned Discourse of the Light of Nature (London, 1652), 107-8.

⁵⁵ For the theological implications of chastening expectation into hope, see Jürgen Moltmann, Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology, trans. James W. Leitch (London: SCM Press, 1967); Moltmann takes the definition of hope as a 'passion for the possible' from Kierkegaard's Concept of Anxiety.

⁵⁶ For Johnson's working-through of hope and certainty, see Potkay, Hope, 142-53.

⁵⁷ Rachel Eisendrath, Gallery of Clouds (New York: New York Review Books, 2021), 134.