The Phoenix and the Turtle

William Shakespeare

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

But thou, shriking harbinger,
Foul precurrer of the fiend,
Augur of the fever's end,
To this troop come thou not near.

From this session interdict

Every fowl of tyrant wing,
Save the eagle, feather'd king:
Keep the obsequy so strict.

Let the priest in surplice white,
That defunctive music can,
Be the death-divining swan,
Lest the requiem lack his right.

And thou, treble-dated crow,
That thy sable gender mak'st
With the breath thou giv'st and tak'st,
'Mongst our mourners shalt thou go.

Here the anthem doth commence:
Love and constancy is dead;
Phoenix and the turtle fled
In a mutual flame from hence.

So they lov'd, as love in twain
Had the essence but in one;

Two distincts, division none:
Number there in love was slain.

Hearts remote, yet not asunder;
Distance, and no space was seen
'Twixt the turtle and his queen;
But in them it were a wonder.

So between them love did shine,
That the turtle saw his right
Flaming in the phoenix' sight:
Either was the other's mine.

Property was thus appall'd,
That the self was not the same;
Single nature's double name
Neither two nor one was call'd.

Reason, in itself confounded,
Saw division grow together;
To themselves yet either-neither,

Simple were so well compounded

That it cried how true a twain
Seemeth this concordant one!
Love hath reason, reason none
If what parts can so remain.

Whereupon it made this threne
To the phoenix and the dove,
Co-supreme and stars of love;
As chorus to their tragic scene.

:: THRENOS ::

Beauty, truth, and rarity.
Grace in all simplicity,
Here enclos'd in cinders lie.

Death is now the phoenix' nest;
And the turtle's loyal breast
To eternity doth rest,

Leaving no posterity:—

'Twas not their infirmity,
It was married chastity.

Truth may seem, but cannot be:
Beauty brag, but 'tis not she;
Truth and beauty buried be.

To this urn let those repair
That are either true or fair;
For these dead birds sigh a prayer.

Some appraisals of "The Phoenix and the Turtle"

I SHOULD LIKE TO HAVE the Academy of Letters propose a prize for an essay on Shakespeare's poem, 'Let the bird of loudest lay,' and the Threnos with which it closes; the aim of the essay being to explain, by a historical research into the poetic myths and tendencies of the age in which it was written, the frame and allusions of the poem... To unassisted readers, it would appear to be a lament on the death of a poet, and of his poetic mistress. But the poem is so quaint, and charming in diction, tone and allusions, and in its perfect metre and harmony, that I would gladly have the fullest illustration yet attainable. I consider this piece a good example of the rule, that there is a poetry for bards proper, as well as a poetry for the world of readers.

From Ralph Waldo Emerson,
Shakespearean Criticism

THE PHOENIX AND THE TURTLE is mysterious, but it is crystal-clear... It would not be easy to say with confidence what *The Phoenix and the Turtle* is *about*. On the face of it, it is a requiem over the death of a phoenix and a turtle-dove, who are the symbols of a love made perfect by refinement from all earthly passion and become virginal...

Hearts remote, yet not asunder;
Distance, and no space was seen
'Twixt the turtle and his queen.
But in them, it were a wonder.

But the poem floats high above the plane of intellectual apprehension: what we understand is only a

poor simulacrum of what we feel—feel with some element of our being which chafes in silence against the bars of sense. And in the poet's own imagination it is Reason itself which makes and chants the dirge, Reason baffled by the sight of perfect individuality in perfect union...

And we feel, in some inexplicable sense, that the poet's claim that Reason bows its head in this poem is a true one. There is an absolute harmony in *The Phoenix and the Turtle* which can easily appear to our heightened awareness as the necessary gesture of Reason's deliberate homage to a higher power. Through it we have a glimpse of a mode of experience wholly beyond our own, and touch the finality of a consummation. This veritably, we might say if we had the courage of our imaginations, is the music of the spheres; this is indeed the hymn of that celestial love which 'moves the sun and the other stars.'

For reasons which evade expression in ordinary speech, *The Phoenix and the Turtle* is the most perfect short poem in any language. It is pure poetry in the loftiest and most abstract meaning of the words: that is to say, it gives us the highest experience which it is possible for poetry to give, and it gives it without intermission. Here for once, it seems, Shakespeare had direct command over an essential source of inspiration; here he surrendered himself completely to a kind of experience, and to the task of communicating a kind of experience, which elsewhere he conveys to us only through 'the shadows of things'; for a moment he reveals himself as an inhabitant of a strange kingdom wherein he moves serene and with mastery. Beside the unearthly purity, the unfaltering calm of this poem, even the most wonderful poetry of his dramas can sometimes appear to us as 'stained with mortality.'

From John Middleton Murry,
Discoveries: Essays in Literary Criticism

THE DEATH-FOREBODING OWL is debarred from the ceremony, and so are tyrannical birds of prey; but the eagle, who is royal, the swan, who understands the music for a Requiem and who knows when he himself must sing and die, and the crow, whose life is of immense span, who can perpetuate himself not by physical contact but by the mingling of breath, spiritually as it were—these are the birds who are summoned. Freedom from death, that is, the power of regeneration, freedom from tyranny, that is, merciful sovereignty, regality, the power of song and the knowledge of the supreme moment, length of life and purity of engendering—these are

the qualities found united in the Phoenix and found again, scattered, among the *piae volucres*. These birds therefore sing the anthem, which, far more single-mindedly than Chester's poem, 'allegorically shadows the truth of love'—they show that pure, unwavering love can find its perfect fulfilment in death, and that its power can extend even beyond death.

(...)

To use Coleridge's terms, the poem has more than usual emotion—and at the same time more than usual order. There is something rarefied about it, yet it remains in touch with human qualities, with the meaning of 'true' and 'fair' in the world; while it tells of birds and of the perfection of love, it tells something relevant to imperfect human love. The language of its lines is crisp and gnomic, each line having a certain lapidary separateness, yet behind the lines we sense the creating mind impelling them to-

gether into lyricism. The structure of thought is related with a marvellous intimacy to the poetic texture. Geometric *eidos* and passionate actuality, meditation and drama, oracle and dithyramb, seem to be bound effortlessly together.

From Peter Dronke's
"The Phoenix and the Turtle"

Coda to *The Phoenix and the Turtle*

What an unequal love this poem is about! The humblest little greyish-brown turtle dove, such common sweetly cooing creature, in love with the mythical phoenix. And yet, not only were they in love, but "so they loved, as love in twain had the essence but in one; two distincts, division none." Between "the turtle and his queen" there was no space, even though distance was seen. The turtle could see his "right", whatever was appropriate for him, his *dharma*, flaming in the eyes of his beloved phoenix. He was "truth" and "constancy", and she was "love" and "beauty". She was "rarity", and he "grace in all simplicity", and yet "either was the other's mine", having two names for a single nature, thus confounding Reason itself.

Perhaps you can guess now, fellow reader, what all this is about. Do you seem to see glimpses of this mortally inalienable fact, that in every one of us a

humble cooing dove is staring in rapture at the loving eyes of a wondrous phoenix? Has the turtle dove of your ordinary existence ever yearned for the eternal Fire? Has the turtle dove of your soul ever longed for a beauty that is nowhere to be seen in the world because it belongs to the Myth, to Reality? This is what Shakespeare speaks of here.

Just as the humble oil gives itself to the flame for light's sake, and as the fallen soul turns to a higher, stringent pitch in the fires of ascesis, like in the perfection of fasts and vigils, what the Hindu tradition calls *tapas*, "a passion voluntarily undertaken, and with a known end in view," which "might well be described as a raising of the spiritual potential to the sparking point" (Coomaraswamy, "On Translation," p. 85.).

And perhaps you can now infer the obvious promise left unmentioned in the poem: the promise of

the redemption of the turtle of your soul, for they had become one, they "fled in a mutual flame from hence," their ashes lie enclosed in an urn, and the phoenix shall *always* rise anew from the ashes. But she won't rise alone. By being true to her, to the legendary beauty, the humble dove is now ever rising from the ashes too.

This poem is essentially, as has been pointed out, about the metaphysical "nature" of union, oneness and unity: can the number one reasonably be called a "number"? But at the same time it is substantially about the alchemical union of our two natures, for just as Sancho Panza's true devotion made him one in spirit with his sublime liege lord, the little dust coloured turtle dove has become one with the emblem of resurrection, having effected the transmutation, the "opus magnum", or simply "the one thing needful" (Luke 10:42).

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Truth is spoken of variously, now as a crystalline correspondence with reality (this relates to veracity), now as a fundamental element of a reality (and this relates to the Principle).

The first meaning has to do with light, disclosure, revelation, just like the Greek term for "Truth", ἀλήθεια, aletheia, which means un-covering, revealing, hence discernment, like the Latin *certum*, certain. The second meaning has to do with darkness, firmness, confirmation, sincerity, with the Semitic root of the Arabic *ḥaqq*, real, and the Hebrew *ḥoq*, statute, both related to in-scribing and im-pressing, like the "truth" of a stamp, hence conviction, belief, as at the origin of the Latin *veritas*. The first meaning is related to the light of fire, the second to the warmth of fire. Truth either blinds or burns. The searing whiteness of a glacier will either blind you

or swallow you whole through a crevasse.

What better image for these two aspects of truth than the fiery bird of beauty and the homely and loyal dove? Conjoined in their mutual flame, these two aspects of truth are henceforth the model for all those other chaste birds, and for all of us, proud and oblivious symbols of those fluttering and twittering elements of our own souls, who are summoned to repair "to this urn" where the promise of the renewal of immortal love lies, and to "sigh a prayer". Prayers, as tradition has it, are to be uttered ever so softly, with fear and longing, with relish, and like a child, with the carefree trust, the certainty, of a flying bird.

Juan Acevedo

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To this troop come thou not near.

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Grace in all simplicity,
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