**Chancellor's English Essay Prize**

**Motto: Only a Shadow**

**Essay Title:**

**"Millions of Strange Shadows": Poetry and the Uses of the Shade.**

**Word Count: 5531**

# "Millions of Strange Shadows": Poetry and the Uses of the Shade.

Any lecture on shadows should acknowledge from the start the risk it runs of seeming insubstantial. For shadows are not only without substance because they lack body, nor just because of an age-old opposition of real-thing and fake, but because they are themselves prone to perverting and disfiguring the shape, the substance of what they shadow. Take Milton, describing Death:

> The other shape
> If shape it might be called that shape had none
> Distinguishable in member, joint, or limb,
> Or substance might be called that shadow seemed,
> For each seemed either;[1]

These lines are not just tritely opposing substance and shadow in a cliche, prompted by a remembrance of the biblical "shadow of death"—here, Milton is considering the way shadows look, their shapelessness, and the possibility of shapelessness itself. Shadows are without shape because they are insubstantial, you can't grab and hold them; and they are also shapeless since they are often *distorted*, stretching out or shrinking an object depending on how the light hits it. Shadows lose proportion, and can misrepresent an object's shape, a fact Milton's syntax shows awareness of—the second line wants to take a self-contained shape, standing alone as "If shape it might be called that shape had none", hoping to leave the matter there, with "none" as the last word; but the sense spills over the line-end, "shape had none / Distinguishable", a qualification that changes the shape of the line drastically. Milton now no longer says that 'Death was totally without shape', but rather avers, 'Well, Death did have *some sort of shape*, but it was all out of proportion, not like any other shapes I've seen', and

[1] John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (1667), Book 2, ll.666-670. Ed. Alastair Fowler, First Published 1968 (Longman Annotated English Poets). Second edition. London and New York: Routledge, 2013.

the reader is left somewhere in-between those statements. Without substance or "shape" because intangible, without body, but equally shapeless because of a lack of proportion, shadows always run the risk of shapelessness—if shapelessness it might be called…

Any lecture on shadows should acknowledge from the start, then, this risk of shapelessness. Indeed, the many senses of the word "shadow" capture something of a shadow's malleability, changing shape nimbly in different lighting, or when viewed from a different angle. The "shade" referred to in a poem might be the darkness cast on the ground when the sun is intercepted by a tree, or a lamppost, or bird flying past overhead; or a shade may be somewhat more substantial than this, a lampshade for instance, referring to an object that exists to block out light. A shadow might be "a type of what is fleeting or ephemeral",[2] yet in the same breath could be that which persists resolutely, "one that constantly accompanies or follows another."[3] Perhaps it is both, these two senses imaginatively united in "a spectral form, phantom", or shade—for a ghost is ephemeral inasmuch as it has ceased to live, yet enduring in its posthumous persistence.[4] Poetic allusion is often thought of in terms of shading: one might summon the shade of a poetic forebearer from the dead, and one might also feel suppressed, trapped under the shadow of an inhibiting precursor.[5] The word is of interest to psychologists (Carl Jung tells us of the "shadow-self" we allegedly each possess),[6] and to philosophers: look up the word "shadow" in a metaphysical treatise, and you're bound to find it shadowed by, or shadowing "substance." Those of us with little time for philosophy might think this treatise itself a shadow, though, since a shadow is also "a vain and

[2] "Shadow, N., Sense II.4.c." OED Online. Entry Revised September 2024, Accessed 24th September 2024.
[3] "Shadow, N., Sense II.8.a."
[4] "Shadow, N., Sense II.7."
[5] See: John Hollander, *The Substance of Shadow : A Darkening Trope in Poetic History*. Ed. by Kenneth Gross (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016), & Colin Burrow, *Imitating Authors : Plato to Futurity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019). For the latter view, the most famous and powerful statement remains Harold Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973.)
[6] See, for instance, Carl Jung, "The Shadow" from *Aion* (1951) in *The Essential Jung*, ed. Anthony Storr, pp. 91-93. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983.

unsubstantial object of pursuit."[7] And on this pursuit, a shadow may take us somewhere we would not like to go, as Samuel Johnson's 4th sense of "Shadow", "Obscure place", indicates—though a shadow, Johnson tells us in Sense 10, can equally be a place of shelter and protection.[8] Obscurely unwelcoming and comfortably sheltering, ephemeral and enduring—the contradictions cover such a range.

Any lecture upon shadows has all of these difficulties to acknowledge from the start. Shapelessness becomes quite the threat, and the semantic richness of "shadow" itself prompts an anxiety: how can one do justice to such copious shades of meaning? Perhaps this risk is really something to be positively explored: perhaps an essay on the often 'shapeless' should itself embrace a kind of shapelessness, letting the light dictate how it falls freely. Perhaps, too, it should try to embrace a certain insubstantiality: in the course of this essay, I am not offering a systematic theory of how shadows work in literary writing, which I suppose would be considered the substantial thing to do; rather, I am interested in thinking practically about how poets have used shadows in a number of noteworthy ways, that have often gone unremarked. Shadows in poetry are often accompanied by verbal or typographical puns, which can help to nuance our visual impressions of the shading of a scene; some shades in writing are allusive, lending themselves well to elegy, where shades of dead authors are revived for a moment; sometimes (as in Milton) we encounter metaphysical shadows, exploring the divides between impression and reality; and sometimes, these numerous different shadows combine, shading one another in complex ways. I want to trace shadows as they are cast from poem to poem across literary history, ranging freely from Shakespeare to Elizabeth Bishop, building towards the consideration of a poem that combines each of these shadings very movingly: Geoffrey Hill's elegy, "Pisgah" (1996).

[7] "Shadow, N., Sense II.6.a." OED Online.
[8] "Shadow, n.s." *A Dictionary of the English Language*, by Samuel Johnson. 1773. Accessed 2025/02/17. https://johnsonsdictionaryonline.com/1773/shadow_ns

First, I want to consider how typographical effects can shape our perception of the light and shade imagined in a poem. Edmund Waller, in a poem describing St. James's Park, uses a bold typographical effect:

> May he live long enough to see them all
> Dark **shadows** cast, and as his palace tall!
> Methinks I see the love that **sha**ll be m**ade**,
> The lovers walking in that amorous **shade;**[9]

The shadows here fall across the verse as they would fall in the park. They fall diagonally, from high to low, across the verse paragraph: "Shadows" falls into an anagrammatic pun on 'shade' in "shall be made", which then falls into "shade" itself. Waller is not just being clever by doing this: the typography enhances our mental picture of the park. It is as though we can see the shade more clearly for this typographical punning: the stretching of "shade" in "shall be made", (a formulation with one too many a's, which is present in both "sh*a*" and "*a*de", which thus stretches "shade" to "shaade") hints at how the angling of the light seems to stretch out the shadows, appearing larger than the object it shadows, while the falling down and across reflects that this is, perhaps, not a mid-day walk, the sun not directly overhead. We can find similar effects in Shakespeare. In *King John*:

> I do, my lord; and in her eye I find
> A wonder, or a wondrous miracle,
> The **shadow** of myself form'd in her eye:
> Which being but the **shadow** of your son,
> Becomes a sun and makes your son a **shadow**.[10]

[9] Edmund Waller, 'On St. James's Park, As Lately Improved by His Majesty', ll.19-22. 1661. In Alastair Fowler, *The New Oxford Book of Seventeenth Century Verse,* p.397. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991. My emphasis.
[10] William Shakespeare, *King John* (c. 1594?), 2.1, ll. 496-500, ed. Jesse M. Lander and J. J. M. Tobin in *The Arden Shakespeare Third Series Complete Works*. London: The Arden Shakespeare, 2021. My emphasis

Again, the word “shadow” falls across the verse paragraph, casting its own shadow diagonally from the onset of the first line, through the middle of the second line, to the termination of the third. Of course, this is from an early modern play, so we have to be careful when talking about typographical effects—regardless, the progress of the word through three distinct syntactical positions has an aural charge that is present on stage. A syntactic shadow is falling—and Shakespeare, in Sonnet 53, is intrigued by how shadows can fall aurally too:

> What is your substance, whereof are you made,
> That millions of strange **shadows** on you tend?
> Since every one hath, every one, one **shade**,
> And you, but one, can every **shadow** lend.[11]

There is some sense of a typographical shadowing here, but the bulk of the shadowing is aural—indeed, there are many shadows present in the quatrain’s repetitions. “Whereof” is shadowed in “millions of”, “on” is shadowed in “one”, “every one” in “but one”, “are you” in “on you”, and the epizeuxis takes the shadowing further in “every one hath, every one, one shade.” The multiplication of aural shadows, the at least two-too-many “ones”, are trying to capture something of the “millions” Shakespeare is discoursing on. In John Donne’s ‘A Lecture upon the Shadow’ (printed 1633), these effects are also felt aurally:

> Stand still, and I will read to thee
> A lecture, love, in love's philosophy.
> These three hours that we have spent,
> Walking here, two shadows went
> Along with us, which we ourselves produc'd.
> But, now the sun is just above our head,

[11] William Shakespeare, Sonnet 53, ll. 1-4. Quoted from Colin Burrow ed. The Complete Sonnets and Poems, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. My emphasis.

> We do those shadows tread,
> And to brave clearness all things are reduc'd.[12]

The first line is an intricate assortment of verbal shadows—the "st" of "Stand" works forwards into "still", just as the "and" of "Stand" casts its shadow on the third word of the line, the connective "and"; then the "ill" of "still" falls further forwards into fifth word "will", while "read" and "thee" shadow each other in the shared vowel sound. The aural effects become more mimetic as the poem progresses: notice how "we" and "spent" in the third line are combined to create "went" in the line below, cramming the two words into one, just as the "two shadows" in the poem become one. And how fitting that when Donne comes to consider the shadow at noon, trampled on by the walker, "We do" in line 7, is positioned directly (spatially and syntactically) above "And to" in line 8, with which it rhymes. It is as though the rhymes is trampling on its likeness, just as Donne walks on his shadow, which is a likeness. And Donne's stanzaic form here casts shadows forward too—the stanza quoted is made of two quatrains in ABBA rhyme, a quatrain that would captivate Tennyson, who himself was often "half-sick of shadows", as we shall see.

Shadows can work to paint a picture of a space then, to give us an impression of where light falls along a line, and in the mind's eye. Another famous example is from T. S. Eliot:

> Only
> There is shadow under this red rock,
> (Come in under the shadow of this red rock),
> And I will show you something different from either
> Your shadow at morning striding behind you
> Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you;
> I will show you fear in a handful of dust.[13]

[12] John Donne, 'A Lecture upon the Shadow', ll.1-8, p.62 in A. J. (Albert James) Smith. *John Donne : The Complete English Poems*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982. My edition 1996.
[13] T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land* (1922), ll.24-30, p.55 in Christopher Ricks and Jim McCue ed. *The Poems of T. S. Eliot* (2. Vols), Volume I. London: Faber, 2015.

Again, the word “shadow” is diagonally shadowing itself, in a manner that plays with direction. From left down to right “shadow” falls diagonally, across the second and third line quoted here:

> There is shadow [ ]
> [ ] the shadow of this [ ]

The next shadow that falls is somewhat less boldly directional:

> Your shadow at morning striding
> Or your shadow at evening rising

Here it is the anagrammatic play of “striding” and “rising”, that sees the order of the letters “r” and “s” reversed in each case, that affects a mimesis, indicating the reversal of a shadow’s direction from morning to evening. But there are other shadows cast here that we have yet to consider. Shadows are cast on the line by allusion: shadows of Isaiah 32:2, “the shadow of a great rock in a holy land”, and shadows of Beaumont and Fletcher, “How all the good you have is but a shadow, / I’ the morning with you, and at night behind you / Past and forgotten.”[14] Some of the shadows are Eliot’s own, filching a line from ‘The Death of Saint Narcissus’ (1912-13), “Come under the shadow of this gray rock— / Come in under the shadow of this gray rock.”[15] This darker register itself registers a more solemn use of shadows: not only can they visually give us a sense of chiaroscuro, painting in the light of a scene, they can also refer us to the words of the dead, recalling the departed as “shades.” Elizabeth Bishop’s shadows begin with shadows in a landscape, and end in an elegiac mode. She turns the directional thrust of shadows on its head in ‘The Map’ (1946):

[14] Both allusions (Isaiah 32:2 and *Philaster*, III.2) quoted from Ricks and McCue ed. *Poems*, pp.606-607.
[15] Eliot, ‘The Death of Saint. Narcissus’ ll. 1-2. Ricks and McCue, p. 270.

> Land lies in water; it is shadowed green.
> Shadows, or are they shallows, at its edges
> showing the line of long sea-weeded ledges
> where weeds hang to the simple blue from green.[16]

Tennyson is present in these lines: not only that this is an *In Memoriam* stanza, so a formal shadow is cast (though the always near-identical rhyming aims to disguise the rhyme scheme), but also that the rhyming of "Shadows" and "shallows" remembers 'The Lady of Shalott' (1832). And as the shadows in Tennyson's poem refer to the insubstantial, we have to question the substantiality of Bishop's shadows here: the homeoteleuton, the like ending "-ows", cannot quite reconcile "Shad-" and "shall-"—indeed, "showing" itself elides the core of the word "shadow", eliding "-ad-", leaving us only the outline of a shade. This is very fitting, since the lines are questioning the substantiality, or rather the insubstantiality of shadings on a map. A map might use shading to capture the different types of land-mass, the different substances, regions, and altitudes of a landscape, but they cannot quite capture the chiaroscuro of the light in a landscape itself. Bishop does not have the shadow fall diagonally, just like Donne's elimination of shadows at noon—there is no real shadow to be cast here. But there is a real formal shadow cast when Bishop reinvokes the *In Memoriam* stanza in "North Haven – *In Memoriam Robert Lowell.*" Bishop hides allusions to Tennyson's ABBA rhyme scheme:

> This month our favorite one is full of flowers:
> buttercups, red clover, purple vetch,
> hackweed still burning, daisies pied, eyebright,
> the fragrant bedstraw's incandescent stars,
> and more, returned, to paint the meadows with delight.
>
> The goldfinches are back, or others like them,
> and the white-throated sparrow's five-note song,
> pleading and pleading, brings tears to the eyes.

[16] Elizabeth Bishop, from 'North and South' (1946) in *The Complete Poems 1927-1979*, p.3. New York: The Noonday Press, 1983.

> Nature repeats herself, or almost does:
> *repeat, repeat, repeat; revise, revise, revise*.[17]

From a distance, this looks like a stanza with only two rhymes, coming at the terminus of the third and fifth lines. But an *In Memoriam* stanza is lurking as a formal shadow within the last three lines of each stanza: in the first quoted, the ABBA rhyme comes in "eyebright-bedstraw's-more-delight", and in the second "eyes-repeats-repeat-revise". In the last stanza of the poem, not quoted here, there is also "rearrange-again-again-change." The shadow of the stanza form is buried underneath the verse—it is as though Bishop wants to seem more unaffected than she is, pretending that the verse has come more naturally than it actually has. But to write under the shadow of Tennyson here is in many ways a moving tribute in its own right. The shadow of the verse form demonstrates how the things we want to say to those we have lost are often buried just beneath the words we were able to say, and that to be under a precursor's shadow is often an act of tribute.

Allusion has often been thought of in terms of the summoning of shades, and Tennyson has cast many formal shadows on later writers: Eliot had also hidden an *In Memoriam* stanza in 'The Dry Salvages', as Ricks notes.[18] The shadow of Tennyson's verse form is clearly felt in later writing, yet shadows in his own writing should not go unnoticed:

> 'I am half sick of shadows,' said
> The Lady of Shalott.[19]

How fitting is "half sick", since Tennyson only allows 'shadows' to cast half of a shadow across the line, "shadows" and "Shalott" rhyming only in the shared "sha-"; the indentation of the second line also seems to cut the line visually in half, while its forward motion

[17] From 'New Poems' (1979), quoted from Bishop, *The Complete Poems,* p. 188.
[18] Christopher Ricks, *T. S. Eliot and Prejudice*, p. 259. London: Faber, 1988.
[19] 'The Lady of Shallot' (1832), ll.71-72, p.23 in Christopher Ricks ed. *Tennyson : A Selected Edition.* Revised edition. London: Routledge, 2014.

heightens our sense of diagonal fall. Most commentators would rightly think of this as a 'shadow-substance' division—within the immediate context of the poem, it certainly is. But darker shadows are cast on the line from Tennyson's personal life. Only a year before 'The Lady of Shalott' was published, in a letter of March 15, 1831, the young Alfred writes to his uncle Charles Tennyson:

> All shadow of hope with respect to my poor Father's ultimate recovery has vanished. Yesterday he lost the use of one side. It is evident that he cannot last many hours longer.[20]

His father lost the use of a half of his body, just as "shadow of a…" might be idiomatically used to indicate something is less than a whole. "Half sick of shadows…". The sickness of his father, beyond hope of "ultimate recovery" is a shadow cast on the line in 'The Lady of Shalott', and the association of shadow, sickness, and halves resounds throughout Tennyson's poetry. Consider *In Memoriam* Section LXX, just one instance of the association:

> I cannot see the features right,
> When on the gloom I strive to paint
> The face I know; the hues are faint
> And mix with hollow masks of night;
>
> Cloud-towers by ghostly masons wrought,
> A gulf that ever shuts and gapes,
> A hand that points, and palled shapes
> In shadowy thoroughfares of thought;
>
> And crowds that stream from yawning doors,
> And shoals of puckered faces drive;
> Dark bulks that tumble half alive,
> And lazy lengths on boundless shores;

[20] Alfred Lord Tennyson, ed. Cecil Y Lang, and Edgar F. (Edgar Finley) Shannon. *The Letters of Alfred Lord Tennyson,* Volume 1, p.53. Charlottesville, Va: InteLex Corporation, 2002.

> Till all at once beyond the will
> I hear a wizard music roll,
> And through a lattice on the soul
> Looks thy fair face and makes it still.[21]

We find in close connection here "shadowy thoroughfares", and that which is only "half alive". "Palled" (l.7), accented on the e, is a homophone of "pallid", which shifts the funerary associations of the pall towards a paleness commonly connected with poor health (one thinks of things palliative). "Palled shapes / In shadowy thoroughfares" might remember Milton's association of shadow and strange shapes, and indeed, typographically "shapes" only half-shadows "shadowy", only sharing the "sha-": there is a sense of formlessness, of insubstantiality captured by Tennyson, which is just the right note. The "cloud-towers" and "crowds that stream from yawning doors" are straight out of a dream—indeed, "cloud-towers" might remember the "insubstantial pageant", the "stuff as dreams are made on", in the "cloud-capp'd towers" of *The Tempest*.[22] Not only Shakespeare here, but Tennyson is equally writing under the shadow of Shelley's dream-vision, *The Triumph of Life* (1822), where streaming crowds of the half-living, "half fainting", and a shared diction of "gloom", "faint", "ghosts" and "shadow" are present:

> And others as with steps towards the tomb
> Pored on the trodden worms that crawled beneath,
> And others mournfully within the gloom
>
> Of their own shadow walked, and called it death…
> And some fled from it as it were a ghost,
> Half fainting in the affliction of vain breath.[23]

[21] Alfred Lord Tennyson, *In Memoriam A.H.H.* (1850)*,* 'LXX'*,* quoted from *Tennyson : A Selected Edition,* ed. Christopher Ricks, pp.410-411.
[22] William Shakespeare, *The Tempest* (1610-11), IV.1, ll. 146-158, ed. Virginia Mason Vaughan and Alden T. Vaughan. The Arden Shakespeare Third Series Complete Works.
[23] Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Triumph of Life,* ll. 56-61, quoted from Eric Griffiths and Matthew Reynolds ed., *Dante in English,* p. 148. London: Penguin, 2005.

The passage has attracted a wealth of distinguished criticism over the years, largely contending with what Empson described as the "short-circuited comparison", and what Ricks and others have called the "reflexive imagery" of "within the gloom / Of their own shadow walked."[24] Shelley is under the shadow of Dante here, and it is worth bearing Shelley's other translations of the Italian in mind as we approach the figure: in his translation of Purgatorio 28, which he is drawing on in The *Triumph,* Shelley translates "sotto l'ombra perpetüa"[25] as "under the obscure / Eternal shades."[26] By substituting "under" for "within … their own" in *The Triumph of Life*, Shelley has deepened the obscurity, the darkness, and the eternity of the shade: he draws attention to the fact that the people walking within their own shadows *are themselves shades* stressing the equal insubstantiality of the body and the shadow it casts, imaging a more than imaginable darkness. The imagistic presence of the shadow is total, inescapable, and illogical—yet the insubstantiality is also conveyed by the handling of the Terza Rima. "Beneath" in the first stanza is only an eye-rhyme of the otherwise aurally rhyming "death" and "breath", and in the last line, "fainting" nearly rhymes with "vain", but does so only half-heartedly. The rhymes only half-work, and thus lose a degree of substantiality that perhaps caught Tennyson's attention in "half fainting." For Tennyson is not only writing in Shelley's shadow here, but Dante's too: as Eric Griffiths and Matthew Reynolds note, "*In Memoriam,* [Tennyson] remarked, 'was meant to be a kind of *Divina Commedia*.'"[27]

Other shadows are cast on Shelley's lines here from his own writing, lines which are elegiac in mode. In *Adonais* (1821)*,* beginning midway through stanza 51, Shelley writes:

[24] William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity,* 1930 (London: Chatto & Windus with Penguin Books, 1961) p, 161. See also Christopher Ricks, *The Force of Poetry,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984) p.34. William Keach has a chapter devoted to the figure in *Shelley's Style* (New York: Metheun, 1984).
[25] Dante, Purgatorio 28., l. 32. Accessed via https://digitaldante.columbia.edu/dante/divine-comedy/purgatorio/purgatorio-28/
[26] *Dante in English*, p. 147.
[27] *Dante in English*, p. 214.

From the world's bitter wind
Seek shelter in the shadow of the tomb.
What Adonais is, why fear we to become?

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The One remains, the many change and pass;
Heaven's light forever shines, Earth's shadows fly;
Life, like a dome of many-coloured glass,
Stains the white radiance of Eternity,
Until Death tramples it to fragments.—Die,
If thou wouldst be with that which thou dost seek![28]

These are two very different shadows. Keats (or the reader, since Shelley has addressed a collective "we") is enjoined to "seek shelter in the shadow of the tomb"—then, in the next breath Shelley enjoins us to fly "Earth's shadows" for "Heaven's light." Or does he? "Fly" might not be an imperative at all, but could rather be descriptive: heaven's light is eternal, but earth's shadows are transitory (in *carpe diem* poems, time's transitory nature is usually indicated by its "flying"). Either a pious imperative then, or something more ambiguous, a statement of fact that cannot quite tell Keats what to do: Shelley seems for a moment unsure of what he is saying, and this uncertainty emphasises the distance between the elegist and the subject. [29] There is a real uneasiness about the elegist's task that extends into the treatment of light: "Life, like a dome of many-coloured glass" is said to "stain" Eternity—a pun on "stain", life being imagined as a stained-glass window here. Stained-glass is often commemorative, but of course a stain is a blemish. We should remember Geoffrey Hill's pun, in 'In Piam Memoriam' (1959), describing a Saint in stained glass as "Of worldly purity the stained archetype."[30] Do

[28] Shelley, *Adonais* ll. 457-469 in Marius Bewley ed. *The English Romantic Poets: An Anthology,* p.868. New York: Modern Library, 1970.
[29] Peter M . Sacks notices this, and associates it with the gathering textures of shadow, veil, and curtain at this point in Adonais. *The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats.* Baltimore ; Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985, p. 150.
[30] Geoffrey Hill, 'In Piam Memoriam' l. 8 from *For The Unfallen* (1959), in Kenneth Haynes ed. *Broken Hierarchies: Poems 1952-2012.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 34.

we stain Eternity by commemorating the dead on earth? Hill speaks of "worldly purity", which is much less pure than plain "purity" without adjective: by speaking of the dead on earth, do we inherently do them a disservice, attempting to appropriate purity in an impure realm? Perhaps Shelley implicitly asks something similar, but he feels much less comfortable about the question: the glass is trampled into "fragments", and he utters perhaps one of the least tactful imperatives in any elegy: "Die, / If thou wouldst be with that which thou dost seek." Back to "seek" there, remembering "seek shelter in the shadow of the tomb"—but what *does* Keats seek? Light or darkness? Shelley does not know, and the muddle he makes of shadows and seeking here sheds light on a lack of conviction in commemorative verse, a frustration with the very verse he is writing, the inability to say the moving thing.

Others have felt such agitations, and explored the frustrations of elegiac writing—perhaps the finest of these in the last century is Geoffrey Hill, with whom I would like to end this lecture on shadows. Reading Hill's poem 'Pisgah', one would be forgiven for not thinking it an elegy—usually Hill declares in the title when he is writing of the dead, such as in *For the Unfallen's* (1959) "Two Formal Elegies", "In Memory of Jane Fraser", *King Log's* (1968) "Funeral Music", the four poems in *Mercian Hymns* (1971) titled "The Death of Offa", or the host of poems he subtitles "*i.m. […]*" throughout his early and late work. It is important when reading 'September Song', that the title nowhere *explicitly* speaks of elegy, and that the subtitle speaks not of death but deportation: withholding or only insinuating this generic quality makes "as estimated, you died" register more impactfully, as though we had been averting our eyes from the reality of the poem's subject matter.[31] In 'Pisgah', from *Canaan* (1996), this withholding is just as important, but has a more immediate personal significance: Hill stated, when reading the poem in February 2006 at the Sheldonian Theatre, that it was

[31] 'September Song' from *King Log* (1968) in Broken Hierarchies, p. 44.

written in memory of his father.[32] William George Hill had died in 1979, some 17 years before 'Pisgah' was published. The poem reads:

> I am ashamed and grieve, having seen you then,
> those many times, as now
> you turn to speak
> with someone standing deeper in the shade;
> or fork a row, or pace to the top end
> where the steep garden overlooks the house;
> around you the cane loggias, tent poles, trellises,
> the flitter of sweet peas caught in their strings,
> the scarlet runners, blossom that seem to burn
> an incandescent aura towards evening.
> This half-puzzled, awkward surprise is yours;
> you cannot hear me or quite make me out.
> Formalities preserve us:
> perhaps I too am a shade.[33]

We notice at a glance how 'I am ashamed' travels diagonally down the page, casting its shadow across to the last line, 'perhaps I too am a shade.' Indeed, the stichomythic indentations work to draw attention the pun Hill is making: in order to make the word "a shade" from "ashamed", you have to remove the letter "m", which in turn removes the word "am" from "ashamed." In the first line, "I am ashamed" has two "am"s, confidently asserting the speaker's being, fittingly scanning  in iambs—in the last line, however, "perhaps I too *am* a shade", only one "am" is to be found. Most immediately felt is how qualification breaks the speaker's voice: the phrase is tempered by a "perhaps", and "I am" finds itself qualified "I *too* am"—which acknowledges only at the end of the poem that he has been conversing with a ghost, or trying to converse with, longing to converse with, a shade. These qualifications break the iambic metre, and break the speaker's voice at the end of the poem—but the

[32] Hill can be heard reading the poem here, in a video uploaded by Jackson Powers: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zTsZqSwEpbA
[33] Geoffrey Hill, 'Pisgah' from *Canaan* (1996) quoted in *Broken Hierarchies,* p.217.

smoothness of the opening line is equally somewhat uncertain. We might hear an echo of another elegiac poem in the rhythm, an echo of Thomas Hardy's 'The Voice' (1912), written after the death of his wife Emma. In Hill's first line:

> I am ashamed and grieve, having seen you then

The first half of the line can be scanned in a number of different ways, but after the caesura we very distinctly hear a falling rhythm in "having seen you then", a dactylic termination that points to Hardy's poem:

> Can it be you that I hear? Let me view you, then,
> […]
> Where you would wait for me: yes, as I knew you then, [34]

Hill's evocation of Hardy is of dramatic import: Hardy desires to view the shade, but can only fancy that he hears it. Hill does see the shade, but is unable to communicate:

> you cannot hear me or quite make me out.
> Formalities preserve us:
> perhaps I too am a shade.

"Formalities preserve us" is heart-rending in its gesture back to the speaker's relationship with his father while he was alive: perhaps it is just the same now as it was then, perhaps there was always such distance, emphasised by the distancing of the white space. But as Eric Griffiths acutely observes, "preserve us" could be in the subjunctive mood, almost beseeching formality to preserve a relationship that has ended—as though the formality of revisiting a place, or the formality of elegy, could preserve our contact with a departed

[34] Thomas Hardy, lines 5 and 7 of 'The Voice' quoted from John Wain ed. *The Selected Shorter Poems,* p.58. Papermac, London, 1966.

person.[35] Perhaps this is why Hill shrugs off formality to a degree, by not indicating the poem's elegiac nature: the formalities of genre and convention cannot preserve a person. And it is worth noting that this silence might cause us to doubt who the poem is addressed to, and what it is about: without knowledge of the subject matter, the memory of Hardy might be taken to insinuate that Hill is referring to a lover, still living, but standing in a shade just out of reach. By withholding the poem's subject from the reader, the shade in the poem is deepened: we cannot see the subject or quite make him out either. It is a deeply private poem, capturing the privacy of grief by keeping the poem's subject to itself—and the diagonal fall of the shadow captures something even more intimately personal. Hill speculates in the reading he gives as to whether it is important that his father's garden rose up and overlooked the roof of his house. The typographical fall of "ashamed" to "a shade" from top to bottom, beautifully imagines the topography, a height that casts shadows down low to the ground, capturing the look of the space that Hill is writing about. In these shadows, the memory of the dead, the "incandescent aura" of a place, the substantiality of shades is deeply felt, and passionately insisted upon. Perhaps shadows are not so insubstantial as they're thought—sometimes such emptiness, such shapelessness, is the only substantial shape to take.

[35] Eric Griffiths, "The lavender of the subjunctive", The Guardian, Sat 13th July 2002. Read online: < https://www.theguardian.com/books/2002/jul/13/referenceandlanguages.highereducation>

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