Elegy, form, and the inorganic: Geoffrey Hill, Paul Celan, ice

Abstract:

Elegy’s address to the non-living poses challenges to poetic form. If address requires some referent of address, then the inanimation of the elegised subject is problematic. This question of inanimation, of the non-living, the inorganic, is developed through the elegiac poetry of Geoffrey Hill (1932-2016), and is focused in his translations/elegies of the German language poet Paul Celan (1920-1970). In this work of poetic relocation, elegy becomes crystalline in the sense developed by Immanuel Kant of a nonorganic process of formation. This essay explores the implications of this crystallising work of elegy, of this work of relocation, for the concept of form in general. The emergence of nonorganic processes from organic spaces in Hill’s work, the re-emergence of a post-industrial pastoral in elegiac form, and the translation of the crystal-image of ice from Celan’s poetry into Hill’s own, scans the possibility of thinking form as a nonorganic process in elegy, and of thinking an elegiac poetics of form. This essay reads Hill’s elegies as developing this sense of the inorganic in form, and as responding to this possibility of the non-living.

Keywords: Geoffrey Hill, Paul Celan, elegy, inorganic, form

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Geoffrey Hill’s ‘Tristia: 1891-1938, *A Valediction to Osip Mandelstam*’ (2012, 58) not only presents its belated position, coming after its subject, but thinks about lateness as part of its work of presentation. The poem puts both the elegist and the poem’s readers in a strange temporal and spatial condition – a strange form of lateness. After addressing the subject, ‘Difficult friend’, the elegist turns to himself: ‘And again I am too late. Too late’. The poem is ‘too late’ for Mandelstam. The elegist is always ‘again’ ‘too late’ to address that lost subject. But it is also ‘too late’ for the elegist, who speaks in this form of repetition, ‘again’: ‘too late. Too late’. Speaking from the future beyond the elegised subject, the poem speaks backwards, addressing not only what is lost to it but what it loses in writing it. ‘Too late’ for its subject, the poem also loses the present from which it speaks, giving it to a past to which it remains essentially incommensurable. The poem is too late, and this lateness is structural. ‘Images rear from desolation | like ruins upon a plain’. Like its belated address, the poem describes images which are ‘like ruins’ in that they come after the thing they image. In this doubling of images by simile, images appear ‘like ruins’ as if from nowhere to attest only to their own strange appearance as ready-made ruins. This ‘rearing’ is ambiguously spatial as well as temporal. Taken verbally, to ‘rear’ is to rise up, a verticality which emerges in the horizontal ‘plain’: something to be read, a monument, that stands out, or up. But ‘rear’ is also, adjectivally, to come behind something, to come last, in the back. Images ‘behind’ or ‘to the back of’ desolation, ‘rear from desolation’, are in some sense the product of desolation, its result, but also behind. Understanding the poem’s lateness will mean understanding this production by rearness: both the ways it makes some form stand out, and the ways this production comes from a temporally and spatially unprecedented source. ‘Tristia’ not only worries about the limited symbolic compensation (in images) which can be gathered for the elegised subject represented there. It also raises the problematic question of its own constitution. What is this ‘too late’ thing, the poem, which is a repetition of something it cannot, representatively, repeat?

‘Tristia’ introduces a problem for elegiac form. My contention in this essay is that the idea of form is reconfigured here in ways that can be explicated by turning to a concept of the inorganic. This works on three levels in the poem: the presentation of the poem as a material object, the relationship it presents between poet and subject, and the interactions with readers which it models. Each of these are both interrupted and interrupt each other. The poem, however, functions by staging these interruptions. It is not organised organically – with sources emerging in outcomes which are encoded in those sources – but inorganically: an interruption of that very work of connection which should underlie images, address, and, indeed, reading. Strikingly, Hill’s elegies will present these inorganic processes merged with and emerging from apparently organic systems and situations. ‘Tristia’, in one sense, describes an outcome of this.

Tragedy takes all under regard.

It will not touch us but it is there –

Flawless, insatiate – hard summer sky

Feasting on this, reaching its own end.

We might consider the formal connection of tragedy, here, with catastrophe: the dramatic moment when narrative is vertiginously played back under the ‘regard’ of catastrophe, etymologically a ‘turning back’, *cata*- (down) *strophe* (turn). This reversal, felt ‘too late’, disrupts the poet’s address to the poet he elegises: it will not touch ‘us’, both elegist and dead; we are together under this ‘hard’ sky that gives us nothing, that goes on without us to ‘its own end’. This is to dramatize the way such transcendence can leave us behind: the way an elegy, which reaches so fitfully back to the past, can turn out to propose a future of its own transcendent capacity to ‘reach’ ‘its own end’: a new vertical space ‘rearing’ from history. Hill resists this, but this resistance leaves the poem rather disabled. Under the tragic regard of the poem’s elegiac work, both poetic speaker and subject are behind. We are not touched, yet ‘it is there’, a tragic substance beyond ‘us’, ‘Flawless, insatiate’ – and indeed, a strangely ‘hard’ ‘sky’: what should be empty space closed off from us, material, resistant. The elegy circles around this nonorganic body which it cannot sense, a tragedy which formally turns back its attempts to move forward. Hill’s elegies both figure this position as a formal condition of addressing such non-organic substance as the translated poem or the elegised poet, and as a situation of reading. We are enjoined, in reading this poetry, to enter a poetic body space which is not organic (not living, and not organically growing). Elegy will thus emerge as the construction of a ‘selfhood’ from this substance; and uncannily, this selfhood will constitute the body of our own reading. Engaging such a position will mean disengaging from both thinking elegiac form as a process of connecting or organically growing something from something else lost, and from our interpretative expectations that such formal connections will compensate this loss of organic connection with a ‘new’ poetic object or body. The tensions in the concept of form (and compensation) generated by this kind of elegiac construction are registered in the structures of expectation, integration, and imagination which make up their reading.

I would like thus to consider the idea that here elegiac form, its structures of image and address, are the result not of growth or causative production but what Hill calls ‘desolation’, ‘reaching its own end’, of being ‘too late’ in the sense that what they address not only resists representation in or to that address as a subject or object of address, but destabilises the mode of address itself *as its productive gesture* of address. The elegiac gesture is provoked by this resistance. In this essay I want to account for this complex structure of elegy as an ‘inorganic’ structure. Taken from the collection *King Log* (1968), ‘Tristia’ is a poem elegising a poet, Mandelstam, elegised and translated repeatedly by Paul Celan, the subject of another of Hill’s repetition-elegies, ‘Two Chorale-Preludes’, from *Tenebrae* (1978), which will form the body of this discussion.[[1]](#footnote-1) This complex of repetition speaks to complications of elegiac poetics on several levels – generic, formal, historical, and critical. To explain these complications, I want to consider this idea of production by repetition as staged, in these elegies, as a direct interruption of organic production. Moreover, I want to consider the ways this inorganic, elegiac production complicates the concept of form itself. The idea of form as the organisation of matter which is susceptible to organisation is complicated by elegy’s organisation of *non-living matter*, here a series of quotations, structures of address, and images. These are pitched, in Hill, through apparently organic structures. That is to say, these elegies find the inorganic as part of form itself. They are animated by the inanimate, a non-anthropomorphic materiality, as their constitutive matter: as we shall see, something like the image of ice crystals. For this reason, at the end of the essay I will turn also to Kant’s *Critique of the Power of Judgement* as grounding a theory of form in a theory of organic teleology, and in turn grounding a model of reading in aesthetic judgement, in order to consider the ways reading Hill’s elegies challenge the organic structure of critical reading itself. My claim, finally, is that Hill’s poems challenge reading to inhabit an inorganic formal space. My task will be to show that such elegy not only deals with inorganic things – not only dead things but non-living things – but is itself an inorganic thing: that elegy is organised around the dispersed sensibility of an inorganic body.

In this sense, reading the dispersals of poetic animation through processes of translation, and reading addresses to and images of what we will come to identify as a poetic ‘grafting’, will mean reassessing that idea of organisation. This encounter between animate and inanimate, between organic and non-organic, has been significant for critical accounts of the elegy. But it might also model our apprehension, as readers, of the poetic body of the elegy itself. Jane Bennett’s sense of the ‘porous’ I produced in poetry at the point of nonorganic ‘it’ becoming a ‘vibrant’ ‘us’ (2020, xii), the point of encounter between self and matter where ‘I’ am constituted in a sympathetic circuit with matter (27-45), indicates the shape of the elegiac encounter I am trying to detail here.[[2]](#footnote-2) What happens to poetic form, and not only theme, to the concept of the formative in poetry, in this animation of an inorganic body? Understood as a poem of mourning, elegy is generated as compensation for an object it both addresses and has lost. For Peter Sacks, elegy thus details a psychological drama (1985). And for Susan Stewart, ‘Poetic making is an anthropomorphic project’ (2002, 2), a kind of elegiac activity of producing personhood by sensory organisation in restitution to its loss. But this play between absence and presence has also led to a critical association of elegy with fictiveness. For Jahan Ramazani, ‘every elegy is an elegy for elegy’ (1994, 8). Tautology, the production of loss for loss, becomes paradox, a sense of the formal impossibility of elegy, and thus generative play. This paradoxical heart of elegiac form, indeed its heartlessness, leads Angela Leighton in discussing Hill’s poetry to characterise elegy as a genre open to its own fictiveness,

a ‘fiction’, playing up, as all literature does, the disparities of form and content […]. Rather than a work of mourning […] elegy might be defined as a work of losing, in which language replicates the loss that gives rise to it. (2008, 222)

For David Sherman, Hill’s elegies in a similar sense reverse a focus on psychology by exposing the subject to its radical de-subjectification, in which, however, ‘the modern subject achieves its nonsubsumable singularity in the capacity to pay witness to suffering and memorialize the dead’ (2009, 168). And for Caleb Caldwell, elegy becomes a site of ethical transgression – again scanning between the impossibility of witness and the need to communicate that impossibility – in which ‘silence’ a negative ethics of subjectivity might be located (2013). I want to focus, however, on the ways address to the non-living challenges the basis of its own address, form, without compensations for subjectivity. This movement from mourning to losing, from psychology to form, raises questions of translation, transportation, and displacement which can be figured if we consider the sensibility of a poem’s inorganic body rather than its organisation of personhood by sensibility. In this essay, I will focus on the ways inorganic processes interrupt organic form in elegiac poetry. I will argue that the translations and transpositions involved in elegiac work might be thought of as inorganic. This incorporation of the non-living into form does not produce organic compensations. Understanding that incorporation means thinking form beyond the organic. Elegy, in other words, challenges the category of *form* by describing a nonorganic form of translation, of movement.

# 1 Translation and unprecedented repetition

The focus on the poet Paul Celan in Hill’s ‘Two Chorale-Preludes’ is instructive for understanding this sense of elegy’s connection to form. Hill’s ‘Preludes’, collected in *Tenebrae* (1978) after Celan’s death in 1970, are slant translations of two of Celan’s poems, ‘Eis, Eden’ (2002, 150-151) and ‘Kermorvan’ (2002, 180-181). Hill’s elegy is entangled with translation, and with the forms of replacement, displacement, and movement which are embedded in that translating activity. I want to characterise this movement as unprecedented. Hill’s poems are unprecedented in the sense that their precedent is the already elegiac, displaced, and exilic writing of Celan. But they are also unprecedented in the sense that their movement is from one groundless work to another. This translation, this movement from space to space, is not only a reconfiguration but a substitution. Hill’s poems write through Celan’s in ways that separate them from their originals. But uncannily, they also suggest that the originals are themselves self-separating, as we shall see, ‘split’ sources. Reading within such unprecedented repetition will mean thinking this groundless movement. In this section, I will show how Hill develops this movement through images of displacement and interruption of the organic in ways which we might call inorganic.

The lateness identified in ‘Tristia’ as structuring both address and imagery also frames the ways ‘Two Chorale-Preludes’ address, image, and translate Celan’s poetry. Hill will repeatedly imagine these processes as ‘grafting’ or transplanting the inorganic through apparently organic things. This is clear from the initial presentation of the poems. They claim to modulate ‘melody’ of Celan’s poems – the mere sound, mere form – rather than any material content: ‘*Es ist ein Land verloren*’ from ‘Eis, Eden’ in 1, ‘*Wir gehen dir, Heimat, ins Garn*’ from ‘Kermovan’ in 2. But this melodic, formal repetition leaks into the content of the poems.

Two Chorale-Preludes

ON MELODIES BY PAUL CELAN

1 Ave Regina Coelorum

*Es ist ein Land Verloren…*

There is a land called Lost

at peace inside our heads.

The moon, full on the frost,

vivifies these stone heads.

Moods of the verb ‘to stare’,

split selfhoods, conjugate

ice-facets from the air,

the light glazing the light.

Look at us, Queen of Heaven.

Our solitudes drift by

your solitudes, the seven

dead stars in your sky.

2 Te Lucis Ante Terminum

*Wir gehen dir, Heimat, ins Garn…*

Centaury with your staunch bloom

you there alder beech you fern,

midsummer closeness my far home,

fresh traces of lost origin.

Silvery the black cherries hang,

the plum-tree oozes through each cleft

and horse-flies siphon the green dung,

glued to the sweetness of their graft:

immortal transience, a ‘kind

of otherness’, self-understood,

BE FAITHFUL grows upon the mind

as lichen glimmers on the wood.

(Hill 2012, 132)

To focus firstly on the opening of 1, Hill’s translation of ‘Es ist ein Land Verloren’ as ‘There is a land called Lost’ differs from Michael Hamburger’s more literal ‘There is a country Lost’. Who ‘calls’ to this land, for Hill, and why interpolate this ‘calling’, this address, into the translation? It departs, even, from the form of Celan’s feminine ending by stressing the monosyllabic ‘*Lost*’ against Celan’s ‘Ver*lor*en’. Hill interpolates, too, ‘these stone heads’ into Celan’s frost, his ‘Mond im Ried’, moon in the reeds. And more startlingly, Hill brings this landscape ‘inside our heads’. Celan’s poem continues by repeatedly claiming that this ‘Land’ ‘sees’: ‘It sees, it sees, we see, | I see you, you see me’. In all this reflective work, ‘we’ is both formed by ‘it’ seeing, and undone again into ‘I’ and ‘you’. This is finally ‘ice’ rising from the dead, a crystalline frost emerging from a dead landscape into the shapes of these pronouns. In Celan’s poem, the landscape withdraws from us, setting its own reflective work in our stead. In Hill’s elegiac translation, this work has been internalised, brought ‘inside our heads’, but also addressed, ‘called’ to, objectified, made into ‘stone heads’ like graves. Celan’s anonymous elegy, where anonymity is elegised in the icy landscape of ‘it’ where pronouns turn, is repeated in Hill’s attempt to mark that landscape, to bring it inside, to ‘vivify’ ‘these stone heads’ with the crystal, ‘ice’ forms of Celan’s words. Elegy becomes an opportunity to take on Celan’s poetic work, not just to memorialise it, or to repeat it faithfully: it is repeated but differently, newly generative of a different relation.

This process is repeated, again, in the opening stanza of the poem’s double: ‘2 Te Lucis Ante Terminum’. Each poem resists, through oppositions, what it writes about. As 1 identifies (and addresses) a ‘land called Lost’, and then moves this land inside, 2 works through ‘closeness’ and ‘far’, ‘fresh traces’ of ‘lost origin’. These oppositions function as images that do not move. Rather than finding a way to pass metaphorically from vehicle to referent, these images stall. Specifically, they stall at the organic. In 1, the moon ‘vivifies’ stone, bringing stone to nocturnal life; and specifically vivifies ‘stone heads’, rhyming too fully with the ‘heads’, mere repetition, which this land ‘Lost’ is inside (and implying, in repetition, the absent rhyme: dead). The heads’ stony exterior, disclosed by an external landscape (moon on frost), discloses an empty landscape inside. The ‘loss’ is internal to the landscape, and this is what the ‘external’ moon shines upon: empty stone heads, loss brought to life. In 2, the ‘Heimat’ to which we (you) thread (*ins Garn*) or go is biologically strange, strangely vivified: the ‘Centaury’ the centaur like flower, weirdly humanised; or the ‘you’ and ‘you’ of beech alder and fern, plants to talk to. All that this vivification discloses is an uncanny closeness of distance: ‘midsummer closeness my far home, | fresh traces of lost origin.’ The poem, that is to say, brings loss to life, brings distance home, brings a ‘far home’ close (stickily, humidly, biologically close: too close, inside) only to disclose traces of that loss. We cannot trace back anywhere because home is already too close; and yet traces are disclosed, paths opened up only to the ‘land called Lost’ which we are already in, which is already ‘inside our heads’.

Celan does not here merely become the conveniently emptied (melodic) elegiac site for yet more peaceful elegiac work, but rather Celan’s poetics infect Hill’s elegiac capacities, a ‘grafting’. Hill’s elegy, with all of its classical elegiac markers (the decking flowers, the elegiac stanzas in long metre, pastoral origin), is itself elegiacally reversed. Celan does not just provide one more empty prompt for monuments. Rather, repetition of that ‘loss’ interrupts the elegiac work. Flowers and plants do not deck the corpse; they bloom autonomously and must be addressed in place of any person. The homeland is not lost and to be returned to; it is lost but already here, and not just here but inside us, inside our heads. Stony monuments do not speak grave epitaphs of remembrance, bringing another’s memory to life; they are brought to life themselves, the stone heads full with no land, with loss.

As John E. Jackson points out, Celan is himself engaged in this elegiac over-determination of imagery in translation and elegy. In the poem ‘Huhediblu’, Jackson argues, Celan’s rearrangement of Verlaine’s ‘Ah, quand refleuriront les roses de septembre!’, as ‘O quand refleuriront, o roses, vos septembre’, radicalises the history of the quotation (1987, 215). While Verlaine asks (ironically enough) when roses will have their time to bloom again, Celan asks the roses when the time, September, will bloom again. Verlaine is memorialising Rimbaud, poet remembering poet. But we can also see Celan’s repetition with difference as elegiac: the ‘ah’ becoming an elegiac (and apostrophic) ‘o’;[[3]](#footnote-3) and no longer do we ask when the ‘roses of September’ will ‘re-flower’, but when will the roses’ ‘September’ re-flower, when will their repeatability return, come back again? But this is not, as Jackson suggests, an ‘inversion’ of natural order. The very repeatability of quotation disturbs its natural order, its temporal present. And this disturbance amplifies and exposes the disturbance of figuration, which connects like with like or unlike. This is what Derrida calls the ‘madness’ of dates. ‘It counts, and *September*, moreover, includes a cipher, a number, rather, in its name.’ (2005, 37). Flowers simulate their September. Flowers ‘mean’ September, which ‘means’ the return of flowers, the numerousness of flowers, their ‘seven’, *sept* in *septembre*. The organic, ciphered in ‘September’, addressed in Verlaine’s ‘septembre’, is numbered but excessively repeats, returns in its loss. As Helmut Müller-Sievers argues, this time about the interpolation of Büchner’s ‘Es lebe der König!’, ‘Long live the King!’, from *Dantons Tod*, as the ‘counter-word’ of Celan’s *The Meridian* speech (1960), quotation is, ‘at the same time, metaphor and metonymy, figurative and literal expression, and it thus disorients permanently the desire to identify meaning and intention’ (2004, 138). Such disorientation, as Derrida might say, ‘madly’ resists interpretation. Yet for Müller-Sievers, ‘The slogan is the opposite of a shibboleth: nothing in its utterance shows whether it “belongs” to the speaker, and no philology can tie it to a speaker’s intention.’ (140). Quotation, exposing an internal citability, a displacement in words, exposes figuration to its own disorientating work. And this disorientating work is, here, the work of elegy: a repetition of elegiac tropes that interrupt the mournful work of elegy by disengaging them from the apparently determinate but actually indeterminate ‘you’ to whom they hope to refer. Imagery, like translation, like elegy, *displaces* its object, such that it becomes autonomously detached from the discourse it apparently secures. The organic time of growth and connection, like those connections of address and figuration, is interrupted precisely by being incorporated. Organic time becomes repeatable in this monumental time of the elegy. The repeated, elegised moment is detached from historical continuity.

We can see this literalised, again, by Hill in his elegy ‘September Song’, from *King Log*. Again, this is mediated generically, through tradition. But again, it interpolates itself, interrupts, into the tradition it invokes. As he will later affirm in *The Orchards of Syon* (2002), alluding to Milton’s elegy ‘Lycidas’, ‘Now there is no due season, do not | mourn unduly’ (Hill 2012, 351). In ‘Lycidas’, ‘Yet once more’ Milton ‘plucks’ the berries before they are due to ‘disturb’ their ‘due season’ (1991, 39), excessively returning, coming both too early and too late, coming again. Again, he returns to a pastoral idyll in which space he might figure Lycidas who is dead. Lycidas’s due season is interrupted by his death, and so the poet must interrupt the pastoral before it (and he) is ready; but by the poem’s close we are returned to the ‘due season’, to ‘fresh woods’. The interruption is unseasonal, but due. The debt established by Lycidas’s death can be credited by returning it to that seasonal progress. Just so, even though: ‘Now thou art gone, and never must return!’, the dead friend King can be credited in the figure of Lycidas. The poem is the work of reconciling an absent future with the plenitude of a suddenly remembered past, in order to sanction the image of Lycidas who ‘is not dead’ at the poem’s close. But for Hill, this ambivalence of ‘undueness’ is elegiac itself. We are enjoined, across the line break in *The Orchards of Syon*, both not to mourn and to ‘mourn unduly’ because there is no proper time for mourning except all the time. And if there is no proper time for mourning, no ‘due season’, then, as in the elegies for Celan, there is no proper ‘Land’, no proper place. The dislocations of space in the ‘Chorale-Preludes’ are responsive to this dislocation of elegiac time, of the incapacity of elegy now to provide its own time for mourning as Milton once did. We are enjoined, by Hill, both to mourn and not to mourn this loss of ‘due season’: ‘do not | mourn’. Elegy must work this ambivalence, both mourning and refusing to mourn, and both mourning and refusing to mourn the blows to its memorial capacities that this ambivalence marks. This is the elegiac distinction between organic, cyclical, repetitive time and monumental, eternal time. But in Hill’s poem this distinction blurs: the monumental becomes repetitive, the organic weirdly eternal, revivified, fateful, ‘stone heads’. It is nonorganic, non-living time which becomes organically cyclical in the poems’ economy of imagery and address.

Time, without content, repeats. We can read the ‘September’ (Celan’s and Verlaine’s, too) of ‘September Song’ through this interruption of temporality, of ‘due season’. In the sonnet’s parenthetical centre, Hill interrupts his stringent refusal to name any victim by naming himself, the poet:

(I have made

an elegy for myself it

is true.)

(2012, 44)

‘I’ am also ‘made’ here, tentatively, from this elegy. But Hill breaks the copula ‘is’ from ‘it’, a hesitation even to affirm the truth of this construction. It is true, I have made an elegy only for myself, but the truth of this interrupts even my capacity to affirm it. It is an elegiac truth, self-interrupting, self-displacing. Elegiac faithfulness is truth to the dead, lingering with loss. But this poem balks at lingering, even as it hesitates, stutters. The time of the elegy is manifestly separate from the time of the death it elegises, so why does that death keep coming back, why, if the elegy works truly to mourn, would there be such *expressiveness*, where ‘September fattens on vines. Roses | flake from the walls’? Here, as with Celan, the poem figures ‘September’ rather than the roses: it is September, not a rose, which ‘fattens on vines’. This is ‘plenty’ indeed, ‘more than enough’, an excessive return, the grossly repetitive consolation of ordinary continuity. The monumental elegy finally gives way to the organic flowers peeling away from life, and the elegy for ‘myself’ is in turn displaced. ‘I’ give way to ‘you’ in my hesitation to distance myself from you, to say that this elegy is for me.

Here we might return to ‘Tristia’, the ‘valediction’ for (the signed but not named) Osip Mandelstam.

Difficult friend, I would have preferred

You to them. The dead keep their sealed lives

And again I am too late. Too late

The salutes, dust-clouds and brazen cries.

(Hill 2012, 58)

Like Milton, ‘I am too late’, but here this lateness is not succeeded by the poetic work of restoring due seasons, restoring time. Rather, lateness gives way to more lateness, too much: ‘I am too late. Too late’. The problem is that ‘you’ do not poetically disappear enough. I am too late for you, but that means you exceed me, do not return, are not remembered (re-membered, put in a new body). The poem resists exactly the production of a new personhood by its own production of sensibility in images and forms of address, exactly that restitution by ‘anthropomorphic’ production that Stewart sees as definitive of ‘poetic making’. ‘And again’, I am left in the repetition of elegy. The second person to whom the poem is addressed, ‘you’, like the ‘you’ in the ‘Chorale-Preludes’ of half-human plants (centaury), is not made by this poetic work of ‘salutes, dust-clouds and brazen clouds’. So in the ‘Chorale-Preludes’, elegy is a ‘kind | of otherness’, ‘self-understood’, my self, my internal space, giving way not specifically to you, but to an outside in which the truth of that internal spacing is under question even as it is externalised. I make an elegy, and surely it can only comfort me, but then where am I if I am elegised if not subsumed somehow into my own monument? Here we might recall the image of Shelley, the elegist, decked in flowers in ‘Adonais’ as instructive for this internalisation of dislocation:[[4]](#footnote-4) in place of any body to mourn, the elegist mourns himself; but this displacement replaces the re-membering work of elegiac identification with an internalisation of non-identity. If I can only elegise myself, then I am suddenly, in the elegy, dismembered, not identical with myself, outside.

This dislocation also affects the ‘Chorale’ prayer form of the poems. Both are sung at Compline, in the last hours of the day. ‘Te Lucis Ante Terminum’ is the prayer ‘To you before the end of day’. ‘Terminum’ is at the same time any abstract limit, terminus, border. To you before the boundary, an address to ‘you’, the light (*Te lucis*) before the boundary. This is a meridian, that border of light which Celan works through in his poetics: the point of turning, where poetry is a ‘breathturn [*Atemwende*]’ that ‘interrupts’ art to speak ‘to another’ (2011, 6-7). As the title to Hill’s poem, it marks the limit between Celan’s melodic introduction and Hill’s poetic response. There is an equivocation here. On the one hand, with Celan, the poem hesitates after the work’s completion, hesitates to carry on working/writing after the day has happened; but on the other, after Celan, the poem hesitates at the boundary of Celan’s own poetry, the too-close ‘far home’ of his untranslatable (untranslated; illegible) verse. Hill hesitates either to affirm or to deny his elegiac capacities and responsibilities, but also hesitates even to affirm Celan’s presence in the poem. The poem, then, is at a kind of limit, of a kind of limit, like those limit-bodies of centaur-plants and stone heads. This threshold status carries into the poem itself: a homeland which is present/distant, the second stanza’s half-rhyme of ‘cleft’ with ‘graft’, working through a cleft, a separation, working, adding, ‘grafting’ as a repetition of ‘clefting’.

This is perhaps the poem’s ‘immortal transience’, the repetition of transience, its immortal, eternal limit which repeats endlessly. Transience, in this anti-pastoral elegy, is immortal, vegetable life blooming and stifling at once. The hymn asks for protection in the night, after that boundary of the day is crossed, asks for protection in the unknown, and Hill’s poem closes with such rousing faithfulness: ‘BE FAITHFUL grows upon the mind | as lichen glimmers on the wood’. The poem seems to close with a resolution: the equivocations over how to ‘be faithful’ to the elegiac subject (Celan) resolve. The mind that was ‘peaceful’ but ‘lost’ inside now peacefully blooms with the vegetable life that seemed so threateningly ‘outside’ yet pressing. But this faithfulness, abstract-organic, is doubly distanced, doubly ‘other’ to the mind: both as something that exceeds the mind, grows upon it not in it, and in its figural relation to ‘lichen’, one organism growing infectiously upon another, grafting. Intellection becomes organic, the mind figuratively like wood. Faith is parasitic, grafted on.

At stake in this poem is the translation of organic processes into inorganic and abstract forms. The disjunction in this final image between the growth of ‘lichen’ and ‘faith’, between growth ‘upon the mind’ and ‘glimmering’ on the wood, is a disjunction between these processes and forms. The ‘growth’ in the mind is emphatically not organic in that it is not ‘of’ the mind. As Hill elsewhere puts this disjunction of identity in faith, ‘it is not faithless | to stand without faith’ (2012, 179). Faith is a connection, like an image, without identity. Where lichen grows through grafting with its host, becoming its undifferentiated surface, for faith to grow in the mind and for lichen, insubstantially, like an image, to ‘glimmer’, is for such organic growth to be displaced. The effect of elegy is displacement: not the substitution of loss with a new form, nor the compensatory animation of the mind in the teeth of such loss, but the loss of a capacity to image the imagination itself.

# 2 Crystallisation, ice, inorganic form

My contention in reading Hill in this way is that the structural processes of his elegies can be explained as inorganic. Not only is the inorganic thematically part of this poetry, with this grafting and clefting work, these images of animate non-living things, these addresses to half-living things, and most especially this mind which grows ‘BE FAITHFUL’ like lichen ‘glimmers’. The inorganic is also part of the poetic function or process of these poems. I will attempt to explain this in this final section by reference to Kant. I suggested in the introduction to this essay that Kant is an apt example because of the way he grounds an organic form of aesthetic experience by using organic teleology as the explanatory model for aesthetic judgement and artistic production. Like an organism, a work of art is judged to have no cause except itself (Kant 2000, 244-5/5:373). In aesthetic judgement, accordingly, ‘the rules must be abstracted from the deed’ (188/5:309). One judges an artwork as both means and end, like an organism ‘related to itself reciprocally as both cause and effect’ (244/5:372). While a full assessment of Kant’s position is far beyond the scope of this essay,[[5]](#footnote-5) highlighting this process brings usefully into relief both the work of reading or judgement modelled in Hill’s poems, and the characterisation of elegiac work, in Hill, as an inorganic crystallisation in which that means/ends causative structure is both radicalised and interrupted. It is radicalised in the sense that the cause of an elegy is, precisely, its end: grief as an assessment of loss, an incorporation of a lost past into a present. And it is interrupted in the sense that this work of connection does not function as a means to overcome loss but instead overdetermines the elegiac present, such that we see the range of temporal and spatial, formal interruptions in Hill’s poetry. Understanding Hill’s poetry as inorganic, in this sense, means understanding form there to consist in a process of non-causative growth, what we might, with Kant, call crystallisation.

Kant’s aesthetic is concerned with describing the correspondence between natural form and the forms of judgement. This correspondence is marked by beauty. But in his *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Kant also describes a nonorganic theory of form in crystallisation. There is space in Kant’s theory for a displacing, dispersing theory of form like that outlined above in Hill. Hill’s adoption of the nonorganic as a structure shows in part what a nonorganic theory of form, and of judgement, might look like. We can see this in the way that, just as Hill ‘grafts’ nonorganic processes into organic situations, in Kant one might find nonorganic production at work in an organic theory of form. Thus, for Kant:

nature displays everywhere in its free formations so much mechanical tendency to the generation of forms that seem as if they have been made for the aesthetic use of our power of judgment without giving us the slightest ground to suspect that it requires for this anything more than its mechanism, merely as nature, by means of which it can be purposive for our judging even as without being based on any idea.

Here Kant describes the correspondence between the power of judgment and the ‘mechanical’ production of nature. Yet Kant continues:

By a **free formation** of nature, however, I understand that by which, from a **fluid at rest**, as a result of the evaporation or separation of a part of it (sometimes merely of the caloric), the rest assumes upon solidification a determinate shape or fabric (figure or texture) which, where there is a specific difference in the matter, is different, but if the matter is the same is exactly the same.

(222/5:348)

The ‘free’ correspondence is like the crystallisation of fluids into solid forms. This is natural transformation, where matter seems to form figures and textures (ice crystals, for example) by a ‘leap’. This ‘leap’ is a separation. ‘Caloric’ is not, for eighteenth-century science, simply energy but a substance itself. Transformation marks a substantial loss. Crystallisation is here elegiac: it is a transformative separation. This is what happens to produce ice crystals.

The formation in such a case takes place through **precipitation**, i.e., through a sudden solidification, not through a gradual transition from the fluid to the solid state, but as it were through a leap, which transition is also called **crystallization**. The most common example of this sort of formation is freezing water, in which straight raylets of ice form first, which then join together at angles of 60 degrees, to which others attach themselves at every point in exactly the same way, until everything has turned to ice […].

(222-3/5:348)

Ice, like elegy, is an autonomous crystalline production by separation. There is no objective cause but loss. There is no end ‘until everything has turned to ice’. Hill’s images are crystalline. Where ‘BE FAITHFUL grows upon the mind | as lichen glimmers on the wood’, we are in precisely this kind of crystallisation (notice the modulation from ‘growing’ to crystalline ‘glimmering’). If the elegy is a spontaneous crystallisation, a productive leap, then it is a leap from loss, from separation. Elegy does not merely resolve this separation, it provokes it. Just as ice is provoked by the serial separation of water from (substantial) caloric, in Hill’s poem elegy is provoked not from an original separation or loss of some person, but from a loss of the elegy’s own internal form. The elegy is faithful to the loss of elegiac capacity which Celan’s poetics mark. We are in the time of repetition, mere repetition, inorganic ‘leaps’ even when we are in the organic: vegetable life does not figure the blooming afterlife of the elegy, but rather the crystalline repetition of separation. For Kant there is a leap where water crystallises, becoming solid, but this happens in a series ‘until everything has turned to ice’. The process is proliferating. Such elegiac crystallisation is not a transformation but a series of discontinuous leaps.

This association of Hill’s elegiac work with Kant’s aesthetic work is not necessarily adventitious. My point in making this association is to suggest that Hill’s poems work through a concept of the organic by way of a concept of the inorganic. And they do so in such a way that they displace the ‘ground’ described here as a condition for aesthetic judgement, and hence for reading: the free correspondence of forms of judgement with forms of nature (and art). The question, here, is finally how one might *read* such inorganic form. Rachel Jones links the possibilities of crystallisation, by analogy, to the possibilities of imagination in judgement. If by crystallisation nature is able autonomously, by a ‘leap’, to produce original forms, then ‘the “leap” of crystallisation can be read as analogous to the leap of imagination in genius, where matter is restructured without following pre-given rules’. In this way, ‘crystallisation continually generates “another nature” out of nature’s sensible manifold, producing original objects which can be thought of as the discontinuous unfolding of a genealogy of active matter’, and is ‘a *non organic* mode of production, generating its figures and fabrics without reference to limits set by pre-conceived ideas of organic wholes’ (2000, 29-32).[[6]](#footnote-6) For Jones, crystallisation is the ‘non organic’ proliferation of natural forms, which sanctions the leaps of imagination in judging those forms. Hill’s elegiac poem, we can now see, unfolds an elegiac facet to this crystallisation process. The elegy is the symbolic proliferation of the world under the aspect of its loss. The elegy, mourning, marks the world’s loss. Crystallisation is the serial proliferation of precisely this loss: an un-growing, a non-organic growth by separation. Hill’s poetic response to Celan’s already present lost world – ‘a Land called Lost’ – is not the aesthetic reproduction of that lost world, but the repetition of its loss. It is a separation of imagery from the faculty of the imagination. The crystalline form unfolds in its own non-organic dimension, a vertical leap, where ‘images rear’, staged by the poem’s marks of external vegetable life and internal ‘stoniness’. The irresolution of the closing figure (‘BE FAITHFUL’ growing ‘as lichen’) marks this separation internally to figuration. Figuration is a separation, not a reconciliation. These images are non-organic, mourning organic wholeness, mourning which dislocates figured identity into elegiac repetition without identity, a leap.

This marks a possible point of fracture in Kant’s theory of form. Nature can autonomously generate its own crystalline, leaping forms; and, by analogy, judgement can produce new forms of imaginative connection by its own leaps. In the ‘Chorale-Preludes’, Hill, however, suggests that this process of crystallisation is at the same time an externalisation. Ice is not just what happens outside. Ice is the point of contact between the inside and the outside. Crystallisation does not merely describe an analogically possible relation between judgement’s subjective inside and nature’s objective outside. That relation is already crystalline in language’s expression as an object itself, like a poem, as in the first ‘Chorale-Prelude’.

Moods of the verb ‘to stare’,

split selfhoods, conjugate

ice-facets from the air,

the light glazing the light.

(2012, 132)

‘To stare’ is to observe something fixedly, with fascination. Why would such observation ‘split selfhoods’? This is speculation: it poses a future connection of what is presently split. The links to speculation are etymological, with ‘speculate’ deriving from ‘speculatus’, to observe, as if from a watchtower over a distance (not from ‘speculum’, a mirror). Etymology becomes in this sense an elegiac exercise: not recovering ‘lost origin’, but rather speculating from an historicised perspective of differentiation the possibility of future difference. Speculation, isolated here as linguistic exercise, abstracted from an uttering self, ‘splits’ selfhood into the plurality of ‘selfhoods’. Speculation, in the poem’s stare, is suspended, a speculative loss of future connection. To stare is to be removed from oneself in fascination. But it also has a peculiar effect on what is stared through, air. To think of air as medium for elegiac utterance is, again, to speculate the possibility of a form without finding that form. The word breathes like ice into the air. Staring, words become material, ‘facets’, crystalline, surfaced and with aspects: objective things newly formed. The word, in being ‘conjugated’, in being declined through its tenses, becomes materially different from the selfhood. But the word is also the selfhood. It is breathed out, a *breathturn*, as Celan’s *The Meridian* puts it. The self is externalised as it is crystallised. The word turning to ice in the air is the ‘shadow’ of the self which breathes it. The self is split like a verb, declining in its action through time, and its action is utterance itself. In speaking, both I am and the word is, the same and the same as other. So we are left with ‘light glazing the light’, light surfacing light like ice surfacing ice. Light has become crystalline, glazing the ‘light’ of the word, passing through its new medium, which is not just air but air that has been spoken, become material with the icy word spoken into it. Light is transformed even as it transforms the air it passes through. Language is prismatic, icy. Light glazes that prism of ‘light’. The word, as prism, separates, splits the light, and the light comes out of it. Speculation is spoken. It happens to the word before it happens in the world, in the air outside. The self breathes air in, and then speaks it out again, a ‘breathturn’. The ‘spoken out word’ would dissipate except for poetry. Poetry, then, is the word materialised outside the self, which might not be worked upon but which still works for itself, proliferating like ice, proliferating the elegiac work of self-separation: splitting itself off in order to witness for the one mourned, and then mourning in turn that separation from the self, witnessing that witness, as Celan puts it, the no-one who witnesses for the witness, ‘No one | bears witness | for the witness’ (2014, 64-5).

The question of address with which I opened this characterisation of elegy returns here, I think, with this characterisation of witnessing. I suggested that the problem of lateness in Hill’s elegies is not only a problem of coming after the poem’s elegised subject, but a structural problem of elegiac poetics. In the spatial, temporal, formal posture of addressing or imaging their inanimate subject, these poems become, in Hill’s image, ‘vivified’ ‘stone heads’: systems of translation and citation of another’s ‘melodies’. Their animation of this inanimate matter of language is, I have finally suggested, a process of language’s materialisation, like crystallisation, as well as a ‘conjugation’ (etymologically a ‘joining together’). In turning sites of organic imagining into inorganic matter, Hill’s poems inhabit Celan’s poetics of the ‘counter-word’, the position of the ‘no one’ one becomes in witnessing ‘for the witness’.

Addressing the inanimate, however, does not result in poetic inanimation. In fact, we have seen how Hill’s poems are concerned with the strange animation of the inanimate, the non-living, and the inorganic. The poems do not trace backwards to an absent subject but in a more extreme sense ‘rear’ up. The results are registered in reading. Hill’s poems read their source material not, as Kant suggests, as organic, reciprocal systems of organisation, but, as Kant elsewhere suggests, as spurs to inorganic ‘leaps’. Hill’s grafted, clefted organic systems model a non-causative systematicity in which reading is implicated in disconnections, rather than connections. One reads not the reproduction by poetic form of a loss for which the poem might hope thereby to compensate, an end which might become – as if by growth – indistinguishable from its means. These poems rather expose a nonidentity internal to form. The poems think a substantial disconnection as their formative cause. The imperative address which closes ‘Chorale-Prelude’ 1, ‘Look at us, Queen of Heaven’, puts ‘us’ in a position of becoming inanimate, yet coordinating, forms, the cipher of *septembre*, seven: ‘seven | dead stars in your sky’. Inhabiting ‘your’ space means, in this inorganic poetic economy, becoming inanimate. Reading Hill’s conjugation of ‘ice-facets’ means investing in his ‘split selfhoods’. Form, in these elegies, is a nonorganic process of crystallisation which, rather than consoling or atoning, splits. If there is compensation in such form then it is for the nonorganic itself, the non-living, and the resulting mimetic possibilities lie in this shift from a reproduction of what is lost to this production of loss as poetic form.

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1. See Burnside 2011 for a recent, extended account of this contextual connection. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See also Bennett 2010, describing ‘*Thing-power*: the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act’ (6), ‘vital’ ‘nonorganic bodies’ (53). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The ‘O’, for example, of Shelley’s *Adonais*, which replaces the ‘I’ who weeps: ‘I weep for Adonais – he is dead! | O, weep for Adonais!’ ll. 1-2 – Adonais being the simulate-Keats remembered in the poem (2003, 529-545). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. These are ‘like flowers that mock the corse beneath’, l.17; the ‘Rose’ repeated six times, hiding the flower in the ‘corse’ and in the verb of the ‘rising’ immortal poet – all this becoming an uncanny elegy for Shelley himself, who at the end of the poem assumes the place of Adonais, whose soul is henceforth ‘like a star’ l.494: eternal, transcended away but weirdly present in the mortal poet. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See Lehman 2017 for a clear account of the distinction Kant is drawing, here, between ‘mere form’ and phenomenal form and its critical consequences. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Rachel Jones, ‘Crystallisation: Artful Matter and the Productive Imagination in Kant’s Account of Genius’, in *The Matter of Critique: Readings in Kant’s Philosophy*, eds. Andrea Rehberg and Rachel Jones (Manchester: Clinamen Press, 2000), pp. 19-36, 29-32 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)