

# *The Literary London Journal*

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**M. A. Coghill, *Shades of Light: A Triumph of City*,  
paperback, 167 pages, London: City of Poetry, 2013. ISBN:  
978-0957351004; £8.00 plus postage.**

Reviewed by

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*The Literary London Journal*, Volume 11 Number 2 (Autumn 2014)

When the book orders for the academic year arrived at my university's library, I was excited. In fact, I was almost giddy. As I have begun to delve into the realm of city poetics, I ordered Mary Coghill's *Designed to Fade* (2006) and her recent collection, *Shades of Light: A Triumph of City* (2013). Because I am a lover of All Things London and teach a first-year University Writing Seminar on Literary London, I could not wait to dive into the pages of poetry. Perhaps I would find some selections to share with my first year students. Perhaps I would be able to show them that they really could 'get' poetry, and that they did not need to be English majors (or even enthusiasts) to linger over words on a page in the form of verse and find meaning. Perhaps I would be able to convey the multifaceted and electrifying vibe of the city of London through these poems. But after enjoying reading *Shades of Light*, I find that it may not lend well to this type of study with poetically inexperienced individuals. Still, I truly appreciate the opportunity to mine through an often under-represented genre: poetry.

Coghill's city poetic contains six sections: 'Love', 'Discipline', 'Death', 'Fame', 'Time' and 'Eternity'. In the 'Afterword', which may serve the reader better as a Foreword, the poet sheds light on the sections and her inspiration for compiling it the way she does. She explains, 'Writing poetry about crowded urban spaces, of necessity, requires focus on a poetic interpretation of people's lives if a city poetic is not to be overwhelmed by topography, architecture, statistics, history, politics, or sociology' (155-6). Some of these components, however, are missing from the collection. Their absence, in fact, leaves a hole. The urban landscape would not be

what it is to Londoners without the topographical references, or architectural gems, or the rich history that continues to drench the Metropolis.

*Shades of Light* is not without merit, by any means, and the average reader can find accessible poems in the first and third sections. In 'Love You to Pieces', the narrator connects the readers with the often-fragmented landscape of the Metropolis. As a result, this glimpse of city life for the disenfranchised is raw, exact and potent. When Coghill writes about common social issues amongst twenty-first century Londoners, she is at her best. In fact, it is this attribute that I admired in her previous collection of poems. The writer portrays a poignant, unifying theme in 'Seven Seven' as she chronicles the horror that shook the capital in July 2005. Eerily, she recalls the quiet and stillness that blanketed the urban sphere in the immediate aftermath. The realisation of the genesis for the halting action of the city comes at a cost, and she sees the powerlessness in the blatant empty roads and homes. For a time, London seems abandoned by activity. Her sentiments reflect the communal response to this rupture in the city.

I have always championed innovative approaches to writing—be it academic or creative—and the ability to think outside the box. However, the section titled 'Fame' reads as stylistic pyrotechnics. There's much pomp and circumstance with regard to form over function, but it blows up in the reader's face. Reading poetry should not be a chore. I can understand the reason for endnotes throughout the collection (although others may find them laborious), but to manipulate pages in a book in an attempt to follow lines of a poem that may or may not make sense does not make for an enriching read.

As *Shades of Light* concludes with the section 'Eternity', Coghill once again establishes her poetic pattern and even rhythms without flashy fireworks of form. As she writes in the Afterword, 'The city with all its energy and activity—lines crossing, junctions—real and influential—is combined with the people, the energy, and the travelling through' (156). Although I found myself repeatedly wondering, 'who is Coghill's target audience?' in this collection, it becomes evident in the end. London.

### **To Cite this Article**

Rebecca Steinberger, 'Review of: M. A. Coghill, *Shades of Light: a Triumph of City*'. *The Literary London Journal*, Volume 11, Number 2 (Autumn 2014): 96–97. Online at <http://www.literarylondon.org/london-journal/autumn2014/steinberger.pdf>.