Shadows in Conversation:
Reflections from teaching English fluency in a pandemic

John Patrick PAZDZIORA

> *I find myself looking round sometimes with anxiety,*
> *to see whether my shadow falls right away from the sun or no.*
> – George MacDonald, *Phantastes* (1858)

A first-year undergraduate sits in silence. They are alone in their apartment, without notes or textbooks, without screens, for their homework is simply to keep this silence for ten minutes. They have started a timer on their phone, and they try to quiet themselves. But in the silence, touch seems somehow louder. Tatami presses harshly against their knees. Their clothes scrunch against their skin. Their own breathing feels ragged and ominous. Somewhere across the room, an electronic appliance hums irritatingly. Outside noises—laughter, crickets (for the first-year undergraduate is nocturnal in their habits), the growl of distant cars—intrude on concentration, inviting rushes of memory and emotion. Worse, as minutes dribble past with frustrating slowness, the student has a growing sense of some other presence in the room with them. Someone—something—is watching, a mind outside their mind, regarding them impassively for unknown purpose. Something fearful, perhaps, hides like a childhood bogey in shadows they cannot quite see. Yet the silence still wraps itself about their conscious mind. By the time the ten minutes has finished, the student has touched a threshold. Their unease has begun to settle towards a deep tranquillity.

   This assignment is for an English conversation class. It formed part of a course redesign I undertook for the spring semester of 2020, when courses at The University of Tokyo shifted online in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. I have reimagined the scenario above after reading dozens of students' written reflections

on their experiences—lightly peppering it, I confess, with memories of my own forays into silent meditation. This paper undertakes the work of creative reflective practice, offering an autoethnographic reflection about teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) in a conversation class amid the COVID-19 pandemic, from late 2019 to early 2021. Through it, I attempt to engage in what dance researcher Heli Kauppila (2007) has described as "an ongoing dialogue between the self and the world" whereby "knowledge becomes an active process, which is dependent on my personal experiences, but which cannot be formulated if I am not actively engaged with my surroundings" (p. 141).

To this end, I draw my training as a writer and literary critic into dialogue with my experience of teaching towards fluency in an EFL conversation class. I use a twofold image: shadows and the dark forest. Shadows were the loosely organizing theme of my conversation class, and their connotations of hiddenness, unknowing, and impermanence took on increasing significance for me as the pandemic progressed. The dark forest is a mythic image which theatre director Howard Gayton (2006a) has derived from his studies of folklore to represent a time-space of uncertainty and self-doubt in the creative process and the confrontation with the other self, the *alter ego*. Taken together, these images form perhaps a single conception: the forest is dark because shadows fill it, and to move through the forest is to walk among shadows. I begin the paper with a description of the course I taught, briefly discussing why I chose shadows as the theme of the course, before pondering the nature of fluency as the course's overarching objective. I then enter the dark forest, taking a literary-critical turn into texts which helped sharpen my approach to teaching during the pandemic before concluding with my recognition of the importance of silence for learning speech.

Underlying all is the growth of my conviction that conversation is a kinaesthetic skill of performance, perhaps more akin to dance than to the solitary act of writing. Dance artist Kirsi Heimonen (2007), a native Finnish speaker, describes her own experience of using English as the sense of an "airy space between the words and their meanings [which] creates an opportunity to write in another way, the opportunity of seeing in another way, or to be lost in a strangeness, in a foreign landscape" (p. 102). The sense of rootlessness, she says, creates the possibility of new modes of

self-expression or of encountering one's other self.

> The words touch the surface of my skin; they do not hit the bones. […] I get lost in the jungle of words; they sometimes seduce me; they take me somewhere else; the clarity disappears; the traces of dancing melt into a foggy landscape. Writing in English alienates, but at the same time it may reveal other things. It gives a particular distance to see, to observe, to recognise. (pp. 101–2)

Significantly, Heimonen describes "this continuous play with words" as an encounter with shadows in which "something emerges, something hides and disappears at the same time" (p. 103). The lack of resolution, the inescapability of perception, the unattainability of complete fluency—these become the objectives. The tug and pull of ideas, the complex texture of verbal and nonverbal, the stock phrases and cultural allusions, the meaning of silences, all combine to create conversation as physical movement which happens at a particular time, among particular people. Fluency is not merely an individual talent but a shared event. Fluency happens between people.

"Esse est percipi"

The foundational English communication course at The University of Tokyo is the Fluency-oriented Workshop (FLOW). A single-term practicum, FLOW is not intended to be a conversation class in the purest sense but rather a preparation for using English in academic study (ALESS and ALESA Programmes, The University of Tokyo [ALESS/A] 2021). Students are allocated into FLOW classes based on their self-assessed English proficiency, without regard to their intended major. This gives a pleasing admixture of science and humanities students, with majors in a single section potentially ranging from mathematical engineering to international jurisprudence to the medieval literatures of East Asia.

The general orientation of FLOW is, of course, English fluency, but this statement requires some explanation. In a survey of 84 EFL and modern foreign language teachers in the United Kingdom, Tavakoli and Hunter (2018) identified four categories of definition for second-language fluency (pp. 338–39). These are (1) a loose, broad-church understanding of fluency as "general proficiency"

in a language, (2) a rough equivalence between fluency and ease or confidence of speech, (3) a more precise emphasis on "flow and continuity", and (4) "a focused and narrow" understanding, influenced by fluency research and relying on objective measures such as "speed, silence, and repair" (p. 343). As might be deduced from its acronymic moniker, FLOW generally embraces the third category, focusing on the flow and ease of spoken English, with less emphasis on such aspects as received pronunciation or grammatical precision. This seems well-suited to the needs of Japanese undergraduates. Tanaka (2008) has argued that English-language teaching in Japan should continue to shift from a focus on written translation and linguistics to skills of speaking and listening, with classes and assessments designed to teach "communicative competence." By focusing on the flow of utterance, students can employ the English they already possess rather than becoming overwhelmed with a surfeit of new linguistic material. The emphasis on competence in smooth utterance thus provides both flexibility and focus in the overall design of the course.

I began teaching FLOW in what appeared to be the wholly ordinary semester of Autumn 2019. My class sections generally contained students with lower levels of English proficiency, who had moved beyond foundational struggles of sentence-level grammar but still felt reticence about their ability to converse in English effectively. I wished to provide students opportunities to talk—to give them a place "to *do* English conversation" (Folse 2006, p. 17)—about academic subjects. Kauppila (2007) notes that a "teacher's experimental and enthusiastic attitude towards searching and discovering new ways of acting inside the discipline" holds potential to help students search for and discover their own sense of self in relation to the subject (p. 138). This seems especially true when discussion, conversation, and self-expression are key planks of the course. So, as a literary critic in an EFL classroom, I try to help introduce my students to the aesthetic pleasure of language. Broadcaster and public intellectual Stephen Fry (2008) has summed up the situation with his usual panache:

> For me, it is a cause of some upset that more Anglophones don't enjoy language. Music is enjoyable it seems, so are dance and other, athletic forms of movement. People seem

to be able to find sensual and sensuous pleasure in almost anything but words these days. Words, it seems, belong to other people, [and] anyone who expresses themselves with originality, delight and verbal freshness is more likely to be mocked, distrusted or disliked than welcomed. The free and happy use of words appears to be considered elitist or pretentious.

Fry contrasts this attitude with the French concept of *le plaisir du texte*, "the pleasure of the text, the jouissance, the juicy joy of language." Roland Barthes (1957/1973) limned this as "[u]n espace de la jouissance" created by the text's search for the unknown, unlocated reader (p. 11). It is, Barthes suggests, "la possibilité d'une dialectique du désir, d'une *imprévision* de la jouissance" that creates and maintains both pleasure and text—not the act of reading or speaking but the act of holding the potential of being read or said. Barthes describes the text's action towards the reader as *drague*, flirtation and seduction, the text flaunting itself erotically towards casual passers-by with *une imprévision* of illicit delight in winsome words.

My FLOW students possessed eager curiosity and sharp intellects, entirely capable of grasping complex materials outside their usual studies and relaying their understanding to their classmates. So, I decided to follow the structure of an introductory humanities course. Students from science and mathematics backgrounds would benefit from acquiring such knowledge, while students from humanities' programmes would have a natural interest in the material. James Thurgill (2018) has emphasized the importance of employing a course theme "broad enough to include all but where the content can be used for specific purposes and tailored to the interest of individuals" (p. 82). In keeping with the broadly humanistic emphasis of my design, I settled on the theme of shadows.

Arguably, shadows lie at the root of humanistic thought. In Plato's *Republic*, Socrates describes a colony of prisoners, shackled in semi-darkness, compelled to watch the wavering progress of shadows from a fire behind them. Socrates insists that by knowing only "τὰς σκιὰς τὰς ὑπὸ τοῦ πυρὸς" (the shadows from the fire) the prisoners are "ὁμοίους ἡμῖν" (the same as us) (7.515a). The world of physical perception is for Socrates as deceptive,

restrictive, and illusive as the prison of the cave wall. Everything here "ἔν τε ὁρατῷ" (in the realm of sight) which appears upright—morally or intellectually—and beautiful is a penetrative pattern of light originating "ἔν τε νοητῷ" (in the realm of mind) (7.517c). The act of learning is turning from material affairs to the life of the mind—from the physical symbol to the conceptual reality. Education, therefore, is training the mind to make this turn: "ψυχῆς περιαγωγὴ ἐκ νυκτερινῆς τινος ἡμέρας εἰς ἀληθινήν" (a soul turning from a day which is night to true day) (7.521c).

Perhaps uncoincidentally, Socrates is one of the most famous conversationalists in history. For Socrates and for Plato after him, conversation equated education. Conversation was the root and source of all knowledge—the tangible means whereby the mind could recognise and dispel the shadows of the sensory world (Kraut 2020). The turning of the mind from shadow to sunlight would be effected through talking. This educative turn is present in every human interaction with the world. The play of light and shadows appear in every human art form—in the *chiaroscuro* of the painting or the contours of the sculpture, in the language of the storyteller and the arguments of the philosopher and psychotherapist. Film is in essence an experience of shadows forming and changing across the eye. In drama, actors step in and out of shadows as the lights on the stage help give form to the dramatic space. The architect and the gardener each play with shadows to shape the physical world. As William Sharpe (2017) wrote with simple eloquence: "Shadows are everywhere" (p. 2).

Consequently, the material for my FLOW classes ranged across the humanistic disciplines, including philosophy, art history, music, film, and literature. One assignment the students keenly enjoyed was the week we somewhat improbably spent discussing Samuel Beckett (1906–1989). Drama provides vivid and engaging material for the EFL students and seemed particularly apt for FLOW (Spivak 2004). Since it was impractical to expect students to attend or stage an actual performance of Beckett, I asked the students to watch his film, *Film* (1965). Beckett's only foray into its eponymous medium, *Film* features a startling, deeply moving performance from Buster Keaton (1895–1966) in one of his final roles. Keaton plays a character Beckett's screenplay describes as "the protagonist […] sundered into object (O) and

eye (E), the former in flight, the latter in pursuit" (1984, p. 165). The silent film simply recounts O's attempt to escape from E's impassive, watchful gaze. Unseasonably bundled in a greatcoat, a scarf wrapped round his face, O flees along certain half-deserted streets with E pursuing, the camera showing E's perspective. Whenever O becomes aware of E's presence, "O enters *percipi* = experiences anguish of perceivedness," crouching in quivering terror (p. 166). O seeks refuge in an upper-storey flat, blocking up the windows and expelling the house pets, and destroys a folder of photographs of himself as a younger man. He then settles into a rocking chair to wait for death, only to become suddenly, horribly aware of E standing in front of him, regarding him unblinkingly with "neither severity nor benignity, but rather acute *intentness*" (p. 171). O reacts in agonized despair. As critic Lloyd Schwartz (2017) writes: "At the end, the camera stares into Keaton's worn, tragic, inscrutable face, and it's one of the most powerful close-ups in all of movies."

The students viewed *Film* on their own time; in class, they discussed their reactions to it as I periodically projected stills from *Film* for their observation and remark. As fodder for class discussion, *Film* proved wonderfully effective. Beckett's concept of the absurd seemed to resonate deeply with them, and they proved adroit at connecting the images of *Film* with Beckett's philosophic concerns. Many were puzzled at Beckett's decision to make a monochrome silent film. Others were both troubled and moved by Keaton's visceral physical performance, particularly his odd tic of checking his pulse after moments of distress. Section after section engaged eagerly with Beckett's images, holding animated conversations about the meaning of O's gestures, E's impassivity, or the grotesquely surreal eye that stares blindly out at the viewer in the beginning and ending of the film. Beckett's images held oddly mesmeric power to provoke deep discussion. His mingling of almost nihilistic despair with a vibrant humanity seemed to offer the students a way of regarding the world many of them had never encountered before. In the silent dramatic space of *Film*, Beckett asked them to witness a profoundly damaged soul fumbling his way through a world of light and shadows.

"All extraneous perception suppressed, animal, human, divine, self-perception maintains in being"

I found myself pondering why *Film*, with its subtle, multi-layered use of cinematic and psychological shadows, resonated so deeply with the students. Arguably, O's anxiety reflects a deeply human predicament. Humans are creatures of light and shadow, after all, so much so that shadows seem to have been instrumental to the development of human consciousness (Sharpe 2017, pp. 3–4). The need to rapidly determine what might be lurking within shadows certainly influenced the evolution of sight. The progress of shadows—their position, their colour, their relation to the un-shadowed objects around them—allowed the individual to orient themselves in the physical world, to trace the progress of time, to hide and sleep. Shadows could offer shelter or foretell menace. They betrayed the stealth of the hunter and nourished the slow growth of the vine. Surely part of the first wonder of fire was the ability to conjure shadows—to manipulate their appearing and disappearing, to place them where they looked most pleasing and helpful to the family band. These irregular, unpredictable, yet malleable shadows nurtured the birth of art— painting, carving, and film (Azéma & Rivère 2012; Zorich 2014). Palaeolithic artists gave tangible form to ideas, etching memories and imaginings onto the cave walls, the patterns turned suddenly lifelike through the juddering shadows of the fire.

It is even possible these images helped engender language. The how and why of human speech is of course a perpetual and ultimately unsolvable mystery (a riddle which language teachers do well to ask themselves now and then). A cacophony of theories surrounds its origins (cf. Boeree 2003; Fry 2008). Language remains perhaps the most distinctive and remarkable trait humans evolved and yet there seems to be only very limited need for it. Hunting provides no evolutionary reason for it: every other apex predator on earth hunts efficiently, even in coordinated packs, without language. The hunt required stealth and endur- ance but not the ability to paint pictures with words or discuss abstract ideas. Similarly, animals nurture their young without the need to speak. They can draw their young close, cuddling and protecting them, or swat them away, driving them from the den, without so much as a "good morning." Human infants even

today are remarkably capable at communicating subtle variations of hunger, wetness, loneliness, anger, discontent, flatulence, amusement, recognition, determination, and flagrant emotional manipulation without resorting to language. Animals of all kinds attract and choose mates, establish hierarchies and communal responsibilities—for instance in beehives—identify food sources, travel in predictable patterns, negotiate sharing resources with rival species, make war, make love, make homes without uttering a single word or bit of grammar.

Something else must have prompted early humans to speak. Music, the closest of all human expressions to speech, is a likely source. Music and dance seem instinctual, rather than learned, behaviours for humans, suggesting an origin predating the phenomenon of speech (Vaneechoutte 2014). The work song, perhaps, was its earliest form. The rhythms of toolmaking, beating one stone against another, of chipping and carving, and later of chopping and weaving, certainly suggested tone and rhythm. These sounds found resonance in the human heartbeat, in the tones of the cries and calls used to summon, supplicate, or seduce other members of the band. The coordinated labours of planting or harvesting, winnowing or cleaning, grinding or pounding, became the dance and the drum circle, establishing the community through sound and movement. But music's association with language—the subtle intricacies of lyrics and poetry—were no more intrinsically necessary for human music then they are for birds.

Cave painting, however, indicates that early humans felt some need not just to remember what they had seen or heard but to somehow preserve it. So, in the play of firelight and shadow, they combined expressive forms, creating what would today be advertised as an immersive experience. Cave art is both visual and kinaesthetic. The artists and original viewers would have associated it with distinct smells and sounds—the smoke and crackle of the fire and the smell of cooking or offering, the cold echoes of the cave. In the warmth and safety of the kinship circle or the stillness of a ritual space, language began. Over time, talking about the pictures became a way to establish an identity for the people of the cave, a means of instructing children in how to see the world (Nowell 2015). Perhaps conversation began in such moments, as the art of explaining shadows.

In the modern undergraduate EFL classroom, however, conversation is not, to the best of my knowledge, generally regarded as an art form. Even as I assigned students works of art to discuss, my own teaching emphasis remained on conversation as a communicative skill. FLOW, after all, is "specifically designed to help students improve their English-speaking ability" and "give students tools to improve their spoken fluency independently" (ALESS/A 2021). This makes a specific, conceptual demand of the teacher tasked with designing a class session or course outline. While conversations in the classroom may at times flow with the vivid, sparkling uselessness of art, the experience of having conversations in FLOW are meant to develop transferrable skills students may need "after the course ends," equipping them with readiness for fluency (ALESS/A 2021).

Yet teaching fluency in oral English, and particularly teaching conversation in an academic context, presents EFL instructors with a series of interlocking challenges. On the one hand, conversational fluency is notoriously difficult to assess (Folse 2006; Takana 2008; Goh & Burns 2012; Fan & Yan 2020). The instructor may intuit a student's comfort or discomfort in conversing in the language and may unwittingly use this level of ease to reflexively evaluate the performance of fluency. Comfort, however, is not necessarily indicative of—and may in fact be rightly considered as distinct from—linguistic comprehension (Goh & Burns 2012, p. 27). A student who assiduously listens to English-language podcasts or who is entirely capable of imagining entire English conversations in the privacy of their own room may find social awkwardness or shyness blots out the rapid thought required in conversation. The student possesses a high knowledge of the language but cannot be said to be fluent. Nation and Macalister (2010) have noted that this experience is frequent among EFL speakers: "Their language knowledge of vocabulary and sentence patterns may be substantial, the result of several years' learning, but their ability to access and use this knowledge fluently is extremely low" (p. 54).

On the other hand, a student may naturally exude gregariousness, mentally thriving on the tension and risk of conversing in a second language with apparently urbane fluency in English. Yet such a student can rapidly become bewildered when the conversation moves to unfamiliar subjects or when the context

requires familiarity with English-language cultures (Goh and Burns 2012, pp. 51–52). This seems particularly true when students encounter older or more literary forms of language (Healey 2010; Garcia 2017). A student may be able to speak confidently about the assigned task but crumbles in bewilderment when faced with, for instance, the poetry of Wallace Stevens or the novels of Virginia Woolf. Even for native speakers, there is simply too much of the language to learn with less than a lifetime's effort.

One solution to this pedagogical dilemma is what might be called *quantifiable fluency,* concentrating on strictly measurable achievements. For instance, weekly class sessions may focus on vocabulary lists or phrases, using the classroom to arrange carefully prepared scenarios which students can act out using their new phrase. Such an approach has several benefits. It provides an objective rubric for assessment—students have correctly applied new vocabulary, or they have not—while helping students recognize their achievements in demonstrable terms. A student who could not previously use "Might it be possible to X?" in conversation but is able to after completing the class feels a degree of satisfaction at their new skill. Applied judiciously, a quantifiable fluency approach can achieve satisfactory results. Its limitation, however, is arguably a lack of nimbleness and fluidity (cp. Goh & Burns 2012, p. 135). In one sense, students are studying for a test, only the test is a conversation or presentation in which the new conversational skills can be trotted out and demonstrated. The student works for mastery of the material rather than for self-expression, approaching language as a tool rather than an extension of the speaker's consciousness. What remains lacking is arguably the heart of conversation itself, what Oscar Wilde elegantly terms the ability to "play gracefully with ideas" (2000, p. 39). A skilful teacher can, of course, overcome these limitations through personal example, especially if they happily combine personal charm with intellectual curiosity, though this may be placing too much reliance on the hidden pedagogy.

Methodologically, quantifiable fluency seems to fit what Goh and Burns (2012) have described as a "direct or controlled approach" to teaching speaking (p. 134). Strikingly, Nation and Macalister (2010) repeatedly use the rhetoric of control when describing fluency tasks. A recommended task allows "control by the teacher," students bring aspects of the language "well

under control," results are "measured" as "items" of language "are processed" (p. 55). This is the language of the factory and the assembly line, asserting a top-down power structure from the master teacher to the mastering student to the mastered linguistic fact. Yet an EFL teacher should not merely aspire to the mechanical rigors of Messrs Gradgrind and Bounderby. Factory-stamp learning thwarts and smothers true fluency. While students may become efficient at completing tasks, they are not urged or positioned to feel quickening delight language itself. Students may be well equipped to quickly describe five illustrations of what a man named John did yesterday (Folse 2006, p. 216). They may well be able to use this experience to rapidly explain what they want from a menu or the details on a graph in a company report. But when a student confronts the charge to

> Call the roller of big cigars,
> The muscular one, and bid him whip
> In kitchen cups concupiscent curds

they are left bewildered. Nothing in the illustrations of John prepares them for the exhilarating exhalation of despair: "Let be be finale of seem" (Stevens 2021). These are moments when the language is pushed to its extremities, when the speaker's sense of control is not so much suspended as shattered. The only way to understand such language is not through measured quantification but by entering an eager, learning relationship with it, letting it coil and uncoil in the mind like the sinews of Zen calligraphy, following the emotional cadences of the words wherever they lead. It is perhaps truer than any EFL teacher would like to admit that at core the student is, in essence, not a skill-acquiring worker but a bewildered, wondering child, lost in a forest of language for which they can see no light or happy end, terrified in some inarticulate centre of the psyche by obscure utterances which dance along the walls of mind like shadows from an unseen fire.

"Search of non-being in flight from extraneous perception breaking down in inescapability of self-perception"

Nor is it students only who find themselves bewildered by trees and shadows in a language class. Even during a normal teaching

semester, teachers can feel plunged into depths of shadow by the emotional and physical demands of guiding hundreds of young people into a place of questioning and learning. Autumn 2019 was not, of course, a truly normal teaching semester. By December, as the academic year in Japan chuffed contentedly toward its close, uncomfortable rumours drifted from Wuhan. News websites began showing images of serious people in hazmat filling out clipboards in a wet market. The full tale of the following months and the insidious spread of the novel coronavirus will be told and retold elsewhere. Suffice it to say, the start of the 2020 academic year found me sitting alone at a desk in my apartment, confronted by the realities of online teaching during a pandemic.

It hardly seemed possible to maintain the vitality and vibrancy of the best moments in a FLOW classroom over the pixelated sterility of online videoconferencing. Assigning *Film* became a dilemma. Showing clips and stills via videoconference was technologically foolhardy, needlessly imposing the methods of the physical classroom onto the online learning context. Yet the idea of discarding *Film* entirely, at precisely the moment when students were confronting their own isolated struggles with fear, rankled me deeply. It seemed almost irresponsible to create a course which purported to introduce students to the fundaments of the humanities without somehow incorporating the assignment which allowed them to engage with the deeply humanistic questions of illness and mortality which surrounded them.

Perhaps in a normal semester these questions would skate cheerily across the mind like a fascinating riddle, a skein of pedagogical considerations to untangle and reweave. As the initial anxious flurry of online teaching began to settle into the stress of a new routine, however, and as the students' own anxieties and stresses became more apparent, my own stress and sense of frustration with my hurried course redesigns for online teaching rose overwhelmingly. The weightiness of the choice, the intractability of the circumstance, and the gulf between the desired learning experiences and the realised online class sessions seemed to provoke a creative catatonia. I felt unable to walk forward but knew there was no way back.

> Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita
> mi ritrovai per una selva oscura,
> ché la diritta via era smarrita. (*Inferno* I.1-3)

Dante's *Divina Commedia* speaks with perhaps the most sublime opening in all of literature. "Midway on the journey of our life | I came to myself in a dark wood, | for the straight way was lost" (Hollander's translation). The dark forest is both a literary image and a deeply visceral psychological experience. Howard Gayton (2006a), a theatre director and drama teacher, has written that "the forest has its own way of manifesting in each creative project." It is, he suggests, a sense of loss, a mental darkness, a shadow over the creative mind. The supposed certainties of the project have vanished.

> It is so difficult to keep my vision of the piece as I travel through the dark forest. I have to trust the vision I had at the start of the work, and that the ideas that have been set in motion will somehow come to fruition.

Folklorist and author Terri Windling (2019) describes this as "the forest primeval, true wilderness, symbolic of the deep, dark levels of the psyche; it's the woods where giants will eat you and pick your bones clean, where muttering trees offer no safe shelter." The image evokes

> the part of the art-making process when we've lost our way: when the creation of a story or a painting or a play reaches a crisis point...when the path disappears, the idea loses steam, the plot line tangles, the palette muddies, and there is no way, it seems, to move forward.

Many teachers, perhaps, will recognize variations of this experience, regardless of discipline. Compounded with external stresses of the pandemic, it came to seem almost without end. Effective teaching felt an impossibility, *le plaisir du texte* a vain and distant memory.

Whenever I find myself in such passages of the dark forest, I inevitably turn to books. Not, indeed, to my usual reading and still less to the texts of my specialism, at least outside of working hours. Rather, I start browsing the corners of my side-interests with an aimless curiosity, flipping the pages of half-neglected volumes from corners of my shelves. At times, an almost psychic intensity seems to descend as I browse, the conviction that just

the right book is waiting to be found, as the magical helper waits in the dark forest to lead the wanderer to the next path (Windling 2019). In such a moment, I happened to pick up an English translation of Junichirō Tanizaki's 1933 essay「陰影礼讃」. At once the cover drew my attention—the black sheen of lacquerware, traces of a river scene done in gold beneath placid white text: "In Praise of Shadows." It seemed somehow portentous, especially after my struggles to relate the shadows of humanistic thought through the unrelenting glare of a glass screen. I had no expectation of revelation, still less of escape from the dark forest, but read with a curious fascination deep into the night under yellow lamp glow.

As Tanizaki's words uncoiled from page to page, wandering from an outdoor toilet to a Nō stage to the doorway of a brothel, I became aware of shadows as inhabiting a tangible, even active presence in his thoughts. Shadows fill the rooms and *realia* he describes, seeming almost tactile in the way they so elegantly define space. Tanizaki explains that "the beauty of a Japanese room depends on a variation of shadows, heavy shadows against light shadows" (2001, p. 29). Such careful use of beauty reveals "comprehension of the secrets of shadows" (p. 32). Sharpe (2017) was surely right to call Tanizaki a connoisseur of shadows (p. 185).

The secrets of the shadow world, however, do not necessarily offer comfort. As Tanizaki knew perfectly well, perception of shadows depends on such irreproducible elements as the time of day in a certain season, the position of the individual in relation to the light, and the opportunity to be in a certain place. The seemingly tactile space of shadows within a room evokes the illusion of stepping outside time. Shadows carry metaphysical weight, a presence of absence or an absent present, which unsettles the viewer by a sense of her or his own impermanence. There is almost a note of pleading as Tanizaki addresses the reader:

> The light from the pale white paper, powerless to dispel the heavy darkness of the alcove, is instead repelled by the darkness, creating a world of confusion where dark and light are indistinguishable. Have not you yourselves sensed a difference in the light that suffuses such a room, a rare tranquillity, not found in ordinary light? Have you never felt a sort of fear in the face of the ageless, a fear that in that

room you might lose all consciousness of the passage of time, that untold years might pass and upon emerging you should find you had grown old and gray? (2001, pp. 34–35)

The question is perhaps as much literary as architectural. The "pale white paper" of the alcove screen calls to mind the paper on which Tanizaki's words are written, the room evoking what Henry James called "the house of fiction" (2009, p. 7). This room as text, however, has little "d'une *imprévision* de la jouissance" (Barthes 1957/1973, p. 11). There is little warmth in such spaces or in such author-reader relationships. The shadows serve instead to emphasize the opacity and emptiness of the paper. Tanizaki perhaps expresses a fear not merely of the presence of the memory of the dead but the loss of self when one becomes absorbed in a text—a text which ultimately knows only "a world of confusion" which helps the reader not at all. His question hangs unanswered on the page, lingering with *une imprévision* of isolation only, the experience of humanity shared through dissolution.

Similarly, there is little eroticism in his description of the "other-worldly whiteness" of a geisha waiting in the wavering shadows from "the low, unsteady light of a candle"—an image of unattainable beauty rather than voluptuous pleasure. Perhaps, Tanizaki muses, such beauty "does not even exist. Perhaps it is only a mischievous trick of light and shadow, a thing of a moment only. But even so it is enough" (pp. 51–52). This satisfaction, however, is surely not in a physical or sensual manner: it is rather acquiescence to the illusion of beauty, the thought and impulse of desire rather than its consummation.

> Between the desire
> And the spasm
> Between the potency
> And the existence
> Between the essence
> And the descent
> Falls the Shadow

So Eliot, in his seminal verses before waltzing away to the world's end with a prayer and children's song (1991, p. 82). The shadow falling after the moment of desire is Tanizaki's concern.

Tanizaki is drawing here at least in part from the Nō drama 「江口」(*Eguchi*), adapted from Saigyō's encounter with the woman of pleasure in 「撰集抄」(*Tales of Renunciation*), suggesting a similar theme of impermanence. As with the alcove, these shadows are comfortless—sexless, even, in that the very unattainability of beauty emasculates the beholder. The geisha, a potentially sexual object, becomes a fascinating terror enfolded in the shadows which hang like particulate ash in the air of a teahouse.

> It must have been simple for specters to appear in a "visible darkness," where always something seemed to be flickering and shimmering, a darkness that on occasion held greater terrors than darkness out-of-doors. This was the darkness in which ghosts and monsters were active, and indeed was not the woman who lived in it, behind thick curtains, behind layer after layer of screens and doors—was she not of a kind with them? (2001, p. 53)

Tanizaki fantasizes the woman exuding darkness "like the thread from the great earth spider"—primal and entrapping, the shadows and screens like a web with beauty under candlelight as bait, poised to devour the hapless mate who dares to cross the threshold. Significantly, the geisha's teahouse is later "destroyed by fire," suggesting that the visible darkness which is filled with "a repletion, a pregnancy of tiny particles like fine ashes" is not so much a trick of the light as the presence of future time (p. 52). Everything contained within the web of vision will eventually be ash, even as the "old and gray" reader of the text will return to dust. For Tanizaki in these passages, the space of shadows contains the terrors of physical and artistic impotence, the impermanence of human longing and the spectre of future dissolution haunting and bringing fear to the present. The desire is left without spasm, the essence without descent.

As I pondered Tanizaki's vision of diminishing, castrating darkness, carrying with it the frustrated desires of old age, it struck me as redolent of Henry James's concept of literary creation. James evokes a similar terror of past and present in tangible shadow form in his short story "The Jolly Corner" (1908) as he describes the protagonist, Spencer Brydon, stalking his other possible selves in the vacant rooms of his childhood home.

> With habit and repetition he gained to an extraordinary degree the power to penetrate the dusk of distances and the darkness of corners, to resolve back into their innocence the treacheries of uncertain light, the evil-looking forms taken in the gloom by mere shadows, by accidents of the air, by shifting effects of perspective; putting down his dim luminary he could still wander on without it, pass into other rooms and, only knowing it was there behind him in case of need, see his way about, visually project for his purpose a comparative clearness. (pp. 35–36)

As Claude Forray (1997) notes, Brydon is engaged in "a type of literary creation," exhuming the "unreedemable time" of the past and unrealized futures into an imaginative derision of the present (para. 4, 10). Faced with the terrible shadows of his house, Brydon soothes them back into innocent shapes of an ordinary room, like a child startling awake from a nightmare. Or perhaps it is purely proto-expressionism. The house can be read as Brydon's mind as he attempts to remember his way back to prelapsarian innocence, redeeming himself through the presence of his child-self in his adult brain even as his adult self becomes a looming terror for his own consciousness, "like some monstrous stealthy cat" (James 1918, p. 35)—a fanciful transformation into a spectral predator which the sterile Brydon self-indulgently enjoys.

Penetrating the shadows thus becomes an act of un-creation. Brydon's re-imagination of the physical spaces of the house entails stripping it of its childish and ghostly associations to become a dull, habitable room. Here the literary gaze, like the erotic gaze of the geisha's patron, serves only to accentuate his own impotence. By studiously observing and learning to understand what is in the shadows, he knows what is physically present within them but also rids himself of the possibility of moral redemption through artistic play with imagination. When the confrontation with his alter ego arrives, he sees it all too plainly, "with every fact of him now, in the higher light, hard and acute" (p. 59), with no recourse to the imaginative defence of soothing stories. His acuity ensnares and destroys him as surely as the shadows about the geisha destroy her victim.

Here I paused in my reading, suddenly alert. The dark forest leads the mind astray in labyrinthine disorder, yet by learn-

ing to watch the movement of the shadows through the trees, the respectful wanderer begins to recognize the patterns of the way. In a strange and wholly unexpected turning, Tanizaki had led me back to Beckett, approaching *Film* from a different angle. Straying through the fragile world of shadows had brought me back suddenly to the face of my own dilemma but allowed me to view it as if from without—as part of a larger texture of text and image. Kiminori Fukaya (2009) has rightly identified the alter ego as a key motif in *Film*, culminating in the Deleuzian affection-image of O's final face-off with E. It is a moment of sudden self-recognition, turning and meeting one's own gaze. This self-revelation is perhaps most clearly encapsulated in Carl Jung's dictum that "[t]he meeting with oneself is, at first, the meeting with one's own shadow" (p. 21). According to Jung, attempting to engage this inferior part of the self, the repressed desires and impulses, the locus of hidden fears, is a necessary step for self-knowledge. In an elegantly mixed metaphor, he declares:

> The shadow is a tight passage, a narrow door, whose painful constriction no one is spared who goes down into the deep well. But one must learn to know oneself in order to know who one is. (p. 21)

Gayton (2006b) points with eloquent simplicity to this place of convergence between the shadow and the dark forest: "The dark forest is inside myself." Beckett, in his screenplay for *Film*, is crisper and more ruthless in his own summation: "It will not be clear until end of film that pursuing perceiver is not extraneous, but self" (1984, p. 165).

"No truth value attached to the above, regarded as of merely structural and dramatic convenience"

I felt now that I had arrived at the forest edge—or at least at a clearing wide enough for a dappling of sunlight. I had begun to realize that *Film*, with O's doleful isolation and flight from physical contact, even the scarf wrapped over his face, carried eerie resonances with the socially distanced world in which the students and I found ourselves. The first-year students were experiencing isolation, fear, loneliness. The sudden, unexpected figure of their own mortality loomed at them out of the daily news. In a normal

year, mortality may seem disconnected from oral English conversation practice and is not usually at the forefront of the undergraduate mind, but the sudden, constant reminders that life is impermanent and bereavement real makes considering it inevitable. The passage of the dark forest convinced me that this text—this film—could somehow help both myself and the students make a kind sense of our experience. It felt, in a way, necessary.

But it was not clear how to bridge the seemingly unbridgeable digital void that separated student, instructor, and text. In the grand tradition of the ruminating scholar, over tea one afternoon I put the matter to my wife. She pondered a moment before suggesting what would prove to become one of the most consistently effective assignments of my career: Ask the students to sit in silence for ten minutes and then to write down their impressions. They would not, in other words, simply inspect the frames and images of *Film* like an owl pellet on a dissection tray but draw its situation into their own embodied experience.

The suggestion was startlingly counterintuitive. Silence is not generally regarded as a positive attribute in EFL learning, particularly when conversation is the point of the class. Teachers frequently discuss silence as a hindrance to successful learning, a challenge which must be strategically overcome (Cutrone 2009; Harumi 2011; Altuntaş 2014; Thurlow 2016; Yu 2016; Hongboontri, Wittaya, & Booyaprakob 2021). Yet a wide and growing body of research has argued for the pedagogical possibilities of silence, considering it as a vital component of communication which helps students' comprehension of the material in a deeper, more meaningful way (Bosaki 2005; Armstrong 2007; Ellwood & Nakane 2009; Schultz 2009; Granger 2011; Harumi 2015; Bao 2020; Bao & Nguyen 2020). In this perspective, silence is a generative source of learning, offering space to think—to mentally play with words and ideas. Silence has also formed a vital component of spiritual practice for many religious traditions throughout history; it is seen as a place of connection outside of the self, deep communication in moments of emotional and spiritual extremity (cf. Sardello 2006; Stirling 2020). As Heimonen (2007) eloquently wrote:

> Silence has the utmost importance. Behind and between the words and movements there is silence. It does not mean

soundlessness. Movements are grounded in silence; it is the basis of dancing. Silence opens the doors to listening. […] At times it brings alertness; it brings sensitivity to the place and to the tiny movements that occur. I know better how I am in the world. (pp. 107–8)

O longs for "[a]ll extraneous perception suppressed" in a state of "unperceivedness" (Beckett 1984, pp. 165, 166). Yet the experience of watching *Film* ironically subverts that longing. Beckett's choice to make a silent film when talkies were already the entrenched standard heightens awareness of perception while estranging the viewer. Watching *Film* in silence can feel deeply unsettling. It can also offer catharsis. By not simply talking about what they *see* in the films and images, but in some way enacting O's "flight from extraneous perception" (p. 165), the students could become more alert to "the tiny movements that occur" in their spaces and in their own minds. In pursuit of fluency, perhaps, they became aware of their own perceiving self, with a chance to "know better how [they are] in the world."

Goh and Burns (2012) write that when adopting an "indirect or transfer approach" to conversation classes, "[t]eachers typically plan activities to fit common situations in which the learners need to use spoken English" (pp. 134–35). In the dark forest, this approach came to seem a misunderstanding of how such opportunities should function. If such situations are indeed "common," students will inevitably encounter them on their own sooner rather than later. If the student needs to use English to order food in a restaurant or chat with an attractive foreigner, hunger and exigency will prove more efficient tutors than an earnest EFL pedagogue. The responsibility of the teacher is rather to nurture experiences which the students will not necessarily know to seek out. As Folse (2006) noted, this includes the opportunity to experience the limitations of their language abilities within the safety and privacy of the classroom. It also includes the opportunity to kinaesthetically experience fluency as a wholly embodied practice.

The choreographer Riitta Pasanen-Willberg (2007) has argued that dancing is an embodied act of memory that leaves a lasting imprint on the dancer's bodymind:

> The present moment that is embodied and lived in dance is
> ephemeral; a movement idea that has materialized in
> motion and space is shaped into another, a third, a fourth—
> a flow of motional moments is formed. Then the movement
> stops; it continues to vibrate in the breath of the dancer;
> there is warmth in the body, a strange heat and a tangible
> feeling. Experience and action always leave their mark. (p.
> 13)

Applying Pasanen-Willberg's conceptualization to FLOW, it could
be said that the act of engaging in English-language conversation
has a similar physical effect that pierces the speaker and continues
to exist even as it evanesces, building the space for the next con-
versation (pp. 13–14). In opposition to the mechanics of quantifiable
fluency, this approach might be termed *kinaesthetic fluency*,
emphasizing the embodied nature of conversation as an artistic
performance. This subtly but powerfully shifts the focus of
FLOW by acknowledging that conversation only comes into
being when multiple people pause and create it together in the
space they share. Fluency itself presents "la possibilité d'une
dialectique du désir" (Barthes 1957/1973, p. 11). Becoming fluent
in any language entails not simply gaining confidence in com-
munication but accepting an invitation to explore the whole self
in relation to one's experience of the world, including aspects of
the self not experienced through one's native tongue.

It was both alarming and fascinating that so many students
independently reported feeling another, watchful presence dur-
ing their time of silence, like O becoming aware of E's unceasing
perception. It may well have been some such experience which
prompted Beckett's creation of the image for *Film*. In silence, the
self becomes aware of itself—aware, at least, of its unceasing
need to perceive and be perceived, its reliance on perceiving
other beings. To pause from the busywork of university life, to
step away for a moment from the constant clatter of the twenty-
first century, allows students the possibility of experiencing the
catharsis of self-perception, of encountering however briefly
their perceptive and perceiving self that sits beyond language,
lurking just beyond the edge of vision. This is the gift of silence:
an awareness of one's own fragility, of the deep distances between
self and subject, learner and teacher, thought and speech, and the

recognition that these distances are what make conversation possible. To speak, the student commits to silence. To converse with another, the student first faces themselves. Perhaps even in an EFL conversation class, the beginning and ending of learning is the jouissance of not knowing, the possibility of knowledge half-concealed in shadows. Conversation begins with not knowing what to say. In her own reflective passage, Heimonen (2007) movingly concludes:

> Strangeness moves in my flesh; sweat incorporates me into this corner, this cage, this cave. I am the space where I am; the shadows form lives of their own and I do not know where I am. The shades lead me to the darkness; the darkness in my body breathes loudly; it conquers me. I do not know myself; I can rest. I do not know. (p. 105)

Note

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