

## Coming to Presence: An Introduction to Nelson Ball

In the early twentieth century, poets and writers, in significant numbers, declared their mission was to discard worn-out forms, grammar and syntax, to eliminate rhetoric from literature, and to do away with the sentiment and discursiveness typical of Victorian verse. An early declaration of the exigency of reforming language was Ezra Pound's (1885–1972) "A Retrospect," first published in *Pavannes and Divisions* (1918):

In the spring or early summer of 1912, 'H. D.' [Hilda Doolittle, 1886–1961], Richard Aldington [1892–1962] and myself decided that we were agreed on the three principles following:

1. Direct treatment of the 'thing' whether subjective or objective.
2. To use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation.
3. As regarding rhythm: to compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in the sequence of the metronome.

Other poets agreed with Pound's notion that the direct presentation of the "thing" could be useful in efforts at overcoming the corruption of language (to which literature had succumbed), and it became a cardinal feature of a strain in poetry dedicated to cleaning up language. Poets were not alone in believing that cleaving to the thing itself could serve an important role in a campaign of rectification. "Zu den Sachen Selbst" became the founding principle of another mission of hygiene: that slogan of Edmund Husserl's (1859–1938) declared that an immediate and urgent task in overcoming philosophical error would be to return to *Sachen* (things, or, in his case, phenomena) as they present themselves "purely," i.e. when freed from all the theoretical accretions, prejudices, and unjustified opinions we may have about them.

This campaign reform served a need: loose, flabby language had made thinking sloppy, leaving it open to the depredations of all manner of moral turpitude. There was an enormous job to be done to clean up language—a practical starting point, many believed, would be to find a way to present the thing exactly as it appears in consciousness. That conviction changed poetry. Imagism (roughly, 1912–17, a poetic program in which Nelson Ball has taken an interest) and Objectivism (roughly 1930–36) took up the cause of cleansing language and thought. The earlier group strived to offer an "Image," which Pound described as an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time. Louis Zukovsky (1904–78), a leader of the Objectivist movement, identified as its fundamental principles "sincerity" and "objectification," which obtained in words themselves. *Sincerity* involves being true to living in the world; *objectification* demands representing its facts. In his "Program: 'Objectivists' 1931," Zukovsky laid out his concept of "objective" by way of offering a purported definition: "An Objective: (Optics)—The lens bringing the rays from an object to a focus. (Military use)—That which is aimed at. (Use extended to poetry)—Desire for what is objectively perfect, inextricably the direction of historic and contemporary particulars." Objectivism grew out of concern that Imagism was only the first step in the reform of language and literature. Zukovsky and his comrade William Carlos Williams (1883–1963) became concerned that Imagism had declined into sentiment and become insufficiently object-like:

We had had 'Imagism' . . . which ran quickly out. That, though it had been useful in ridding the field of verbiage, had no formal necessity implicit in it . . . the poem, like every other form of art is an object, an object that in itself formally presents

its case and its meaning by the very form it assumes.

Zukofsky concurred, asserting that a poem's form was one with its meaning: the objects, or elements, of the composition should take their meaning from their placement in the structure. "Poetry convinces not by argument," Zukofsky wrote, "but by the *form* it creates to carry its content."

Objectivism was short-lived, but an interest in the particular, and in poetry as language condensed to gem-like perfection, lived on after. William Carlos Williams helped bring Objectivist ideals forward into the post-World War II period, by developing a very taut verse form that sought for the purity of an American vernacular and a variable metre, based on a flexible sense of spacing, that would produce "a rhythm . . . [that] corresponds exactly to the emotion or shade of emotion to be expressed." Another who brought Objectivist values into the post-War era was Lorine Niedecker (1903–70), who increased the quantum of subjective feeling in Objectivist verse without obscuring the central focus on presenting the thing itself. This strain in poetics continues today in two principal forms: the first is exemplified in the writings of the L=A=N=G=U=A=GE poets; and the second, and (in my view) the more important, is found in the verse (largely from the West Coast of the United States and Canada) who have been influenced by Chinese and Japanese literary forms.

Nelson Ball's minimalist poetry developed out of this general interest in presentational immediacy. It has extended general virtues of that strain of poetry in three ways. The first relies on his highly developed sense of how a poem's graphic form could embody a spatial syntax that reveals the dynamics of the thought process that brings the poem into being. The second virtue is a remarkable sensitivity and responsiveness to the vital harmony that guides the mind and the turning seasons alike and to the beauty and sadness of transience, which manifests itself in language as simple, direct statement, unburdened by judgment (or rhetoric). The third was to develop ways of turning Objectivist-derived poetry's minimalist forms towards language and graphic forms that convey his hierophantic sense of the coming-to-presence of the thing.

Let us consider these one at a time. As an example of the first, take "An Exercise" from *The Concrete Air* (2001):

Breath  
comes  
  
in rapid  
catches  
  
to the  
canoeist  
  
shooting  
rapids

Here the line breaks (and the spaces and gaps they create) convey the dynamics of the poet's thought process. The excitement breaks the thought into short fragments. Breath [ - pause - ] comes—the startling goodness of the wonder of breath is conveyed by separating the two words. The line break after "in rapid" while thought breaks off to allow a wonderful (convention-defying) word—"catches"—to appear. The line break after "shooting" creates another pause, to allow the ever so slightly changed "rapid" (now "rapids") to break upon consciousness. As that change erupts into consciousness, it brings with it the realization that here a slight lexical difference constitutes a great difference in thought. At the same time, the repetition with variation—a relative of musical form—of "rapid" connects the canoeist's/poet's breathing body to

the world it is a part of. There are other musical/aural aspects of this organization of words. The word “rapids” is preceded by “shooting”; there are only two other occurrences of vowels that are not short, and both of them (in “comes” and “canoeist”) are reduced ‘o’s—and both of them elicit a sense of exhilaration. The doubled ‘o’ in “shooting,” which produces a long ‘u’ sound, connects with the words having reduced o sounds, and it creates an even stronger dynamic effect than they do, in anticipation of the final “rapids.” In this context, the sound of “canoeist/ shooting/ rapids” rises towards wonder.

The intimate relation in “An Exercise” between the spatial syntax and the structure of the thought makes it possible for us (readers) to join with the poet in observing the process by which an insight forms itself: the spaces, offering the blank page, suggest those mental hesitations (that mental calm) that allow the thought process to refresh itself (that is, to purge itself of the illusion by returning to the ground). The empty space of the page becomes an analogue of the clear mind (about which nothing can be said), against which things come to stand forth. These gaps also encourage the reader to conjecture what the next link would be: in this respect, too, spatial syntax encourages the reader to engage in a similar thought process, of gathering together what the poem offers (including these gaps and spacings). The poem itself becomes an object that invites much thought.

Others have commented on Ball’s tightly wrought observations of the natural world, which are reported in such sparse forms. Commentators are right to note that, and doing so highlights an important feature of Ball’s work. However, its importance has not really been recognized. Travis V. Mason’s review of Ball’s *At the Edge of the Frog Pond* (2004) in *Canadian Literature* is a case in point. As accurate as Ball’s observations are, Mason suggests, after the twentieth such poem one begins to tire of the sparseness, longing for reflection, philosophy, metaphor. The novelty does not so much wear off as the power of acute observation fails to sustain itself (or the reader) . . . they seem no longer to be about the edge of anything. Individual poems have the potential to move a reader with seemingly little effort; accumulated, they have a tendency to sharpen one’s attention to a point too fine to be of any real significance.

But reflection and philosophy can—indeed ought—to be embodied in the form of the poems, including its spatial form. If one pays attention to the many levels on which Ball’s poems operate (instead of searching for reflection and metaphors), one comes to understand they offer a deep meditation, in which nature is viewed as the manifestation of a process that compromises little with human beings and their desire to know. Nature involves change that would go on without us, and for this reason it seems inscrutable to us. Utterly beyond understanding, it remains a mystery that brings beings into being (presence), but itself remains a mystery. Πηθισι κρθησται πηλει (*phusis kruptesthai philei*), Heraclites said: “Nature”—let us take this as *natura naturans* (nature naturing) “loves to hide.” We see what nature brings to presence, but its essential nature hides. This is one aspect of the meanings of the gaps—the spacings—in his poems. Zukofsky’s declaration of the Objectivist program states,

A poem. A poem as object—And yet certain it arose in the veins and capillaries, if only in the intelligence—Experiences—(every word can’t be overdefined) experienced as an object—Perfect rest—Or nature as creator, existing perfect, experience perfecting activity of existence, making it—theologically, perhaps—like the Ineffable.

Finally, in accord with Zukofsky’s notion of the poem, the spatial form makes the poem an object in its own right—not a representation, but a thing, with nearly infinitely resonance (as any harmoniously integrated thing does).

Ball brilliantly adapts the (indescribable) quality of each space to the particular way a thing

comes to presence on a particular occasion. Here is “Accidents,” also from *The Concrete Air*:

There are no accidents  
in this world

of intricate  
connections

and unpredicted  
events—

we simply don't  
always know

what's  
happening

It is classical Stoicism, married to a sense that our mind can go only so far in participating in the order of things (I set out below the importance to this form of verse of the idea of the λόγος [*logos*], which steers all things).

Consider, too, this evocation of wonder, from *With Issa: Poems 1964–1971* (1991):

GOING ON

Blue  
sky  
bird  
fly  
sun  
set  
earth  
turn

Notice the subtlety with which the first stanza produces a sense of rest, anchored as it is with a noun in the second (emphasized) line. This repose gives way to the dynamism of the next two stanzas, in which nouns compose the first unit, and verbs form the second, more strongly marked unit. Furthermore, rhyming “sky” with “fly” links those two stanzas, through a device that has stasis giving over to flight. The third stanza resolves almost into a formula, viz., the ordinary word “sunset,” with only the break between the two syllables pulling against that. This tentative weakening of the force of the line break leads to the pure dynamism of the next two lines, “earth/” (note the omission of the definite article) “turn.” Note the lack of the expected ‘s’ from “turns”: this deviation from what we expect creates a tension that impels us towards the realization that this lack leaves open the possibility that this stanza is composed of two nouns, with no verb (it could even be, following the model of the previous stanza, a composite word, “worldturn” broken into two, and that would suggest that a sunset marks the end of another revolution of the earth). The syntactical ambiguity of the final stanza leaves the poem without a definite resolution—leaves it, so to say, floating in an indeterminate semantic space. It elicits a sense of that which eludes determinate understanding. The poem’s spatial organization solicits (or at least invites) epiphany, those moments when the experience of something giving itself to be seen reverberates through our whole being. It ignites the mind, and renders it speechless. That speechlessness is very much to the point: for here poetic language is pared down to its essence—a proto-metaphoric relation between two elements—in this poem largely (but not exclusively) the relation between the first and the second words/ lines in each stanza. The mind forges impossible compounds, and, in doing so, it does what poetry must, viz., express the

inexpressible. It does something else, too: it offers an inventory of possible tensions—of deviations from ordinary language that are the essence of poetic language—that can transform anything (any rich observation and any ordinary word) into poetry. Syntax, which provides the protocols for an archival retrieval system (which language use essentially is), makes something novel out of elements that are ordinarily shopworn (blue/ sky)—it does so because here syntax governs the harmony of the spatial form, guiding it towards revealing the mind's operations.

The intimate connection of syntax and spatial form in Nelson Ball's poetry leads directly to its third virtue, his hierophantic sense of the coming-to-presence of the thing (or phenomenal object). Ball's poetry offers what we might call a micro-aesthetic of perception. I do not mean by this coming to understanding, nor (what Travis V. Mason would have) the recognition of an image's symbolic meaning or its metaphoric evocations, nor even some intimation of the rich associative resonances it might have. I mean, first, the perception of the thing itself, in all its uniqueness; and, second, a recognition of a singular sensory and aesthetic dynamic, by which the phenomenal reality comes to shine forth in-and-for-itself. A central notion in Husserl's phenomenology is that of *für-sich-selbst-erscheinen*—which technically means self-manifestation or self-giveness, but I would prefer (not least to indicate its connection with Nelson Ball's poetry), to translate in a way that preserves more of its etymological significance, as “shining forth in-and-for-itself.”

Perception is integrative—it is a growing together of elements that continues until it has attained a form that can enter the lighted clearing. Equally, a poem is a gathering: a poem comes to pass when love gives words the urge to grow together. This correspondence (call it isomorphism, if you prefer being more technical) is a guiding principle of Ball's poetry (and Ball's poems are truly charitable constructs). The spatial form of Ball's poetry conveys the words' hesitations in moving towards consolidative experience—the operations of a mind gathering together moments of experience in such a way that their assemblage (including the spaces it incorporates) becomes epiphanic. That is one meaning of the gaps and spacing in his poetry: they reflect the mind's stammering as it seeks to bring an image into the effulgence of creative seeing. If semantic chaos is moral anarchy, then the growing-together of words as they move towards an integrative form is the hierophany of the Good, for it is the Good's love that guides perception towards a harmonious vision. What is, comes to presence though a dually consolidative process—through an integration that brings the diverse elements into a harmonious form, and through an integration by which the self gives itself over to the other and at the same time (this is surely the ultimate of reciprocity) enters into the other. Kenneth Rexroth, reviewing Louis Zukofsky's *Some Time: Short Poems* (1956) for the *New York Review of Books*, described its poems as “exercises in absolute clarification, crystal cabinets full of air and angels” and said the collection “was more important and moving (and more exemplary and instructive to the young) ” than any “likely to be published for a long time.” The same could be said of Ball's poems.

I return to Zukofsky's ideas of sincerity and objectification. Sincerity occurs when writing “is the detail, not mirage, of seeing, of thinking with the things as they exist, and of directing them along a line of melody.” The energies in things themselves yearn for shapeliness. Ποίησις (*poiēsis*) is the nurturing of those yearnings so that they may fulfil themselves, a form of cooperation so intimate that the self and the other interpenetrate: “Shapes suggest themselves,” Zukofsky notes, “and the mind senses and receives awareness.” The spaces themselves allow for the mind to cooperate with something beyond, to bring forth these “luminous moments” of harmony, when the thing emerges in perfect clarity of vision. Objectivity confirms this value of the thing beyond the limited self: “This rested totality may be called objectification—the apprehension satisfied completely as to the appearance of the art form as an object.” The perception rests when, guided by what is beyond it, has satisfied itself by bringing forth a perfectly integrated totality and shines forth in-and-for-itself. Perception aims at such objectivity,

and the process is isomorphic of the coming-to-be of the work of art, which the poet experiences as he or she is guided to nurture a poem into being. Finally, like a Song dynasty (960–1279) painting (let's use Muqui's *Six Persimmons* as an example), it transmutes the transient into timelessness.

The natural object is “always the adequate symbol,” Pound instructed those poets who dedicated themselves to cleaning up language and thought. This concern with spiritual purification through summoning the thing itself was something Pound claimed to have discovered in Chinese poetry (where, he deemed, it had found its exemplary form), and many early twentieth-century poets followed him in this belief. When I remarked that the strain of Imagist and Objectivist-derived poetics that developed among West Coast poets was influenced by the poetry of China and Japan, it is this sense of the perfection of a poem as offering a metaphysical revelation possessing a moral force. By now, this influence has matured (due to a more developed familiarity with Chinese poetic forms, Chinese philosophy and Chinese spirituality)—and what it has developed into has parallels with the metaphysical and moral sense of Nelson Ball's poetry.

Ball's poems express an accepting stance towards reality—indeed, a treasuring of the immediate moment for what it is. In the Tiantai (天台, Heavenly Terrace) School of Chinese Buddhism, this stance is described as 真如 (*chen-ju*, Sanskrit: *tathat*, Suchness), which conveys the idea of true insight into reality. The historian of Chinese philosophy Wing-Tsit Chan glosses the term 真如 thus: “True Thusness or Suchness (*tathat* . . .) means truth and it-is-so. As truth, it is the antithesis to illusion and falsehood, and in “being so” it is eternal, unchangeable, indestructible, without character or nature, and it is not produced by causes. It is the Absolute, Ultimate Reality, or True Reality, the Storehouse of the Thus-come, the Realm of Dharmas, Dharma-nature, and Perfect Reality. Chan stories often suggest that, *chen-ju* (or *tathatā*) is best revealed in the seemingly mundane or meaningless, such as noticing the way the wind blows through a field of grass, or watching someone's face light up as they smile. *Chen-ju* conveys the idea of the perfection of the immediate moment, the here-and-now, which is entirely unique and cannot be compared to any other moment. Huayan (華嚴) Buddhism teaches that *chen-ju* represents the moment when the phenomenal merges with the noumenal, when “every colour or fragrance is none other than the Ultimate Truth.” Each thing is a complete manifestation of the whole. The great expositor of Huayan metaphysics, Fa Zang's (法藏, 643–712) *Calming and Contemplation in the Five Teachings of Huayan* (華嚴五教止觀, *Huayan wujiao zhiguan*) offered one of Chinese Buddhism's great metaphysical images:

The jeweled net of Sakra is also called Indra's Net, and is made up of jewels. The jewels are shiny and reflect each other successively, their images permeating each other over and over. In a single jewel they all appear at the same time, and this can be seen in each and every jewel. There is really no coming or going. Now if we turn to the southwest direction and pick up one of the jewels to examine it, we will see that this one jewel can immediately reflect the images of all of the other jewels. Each of the other jewels will do the same. Each jewel will simultaneously reflect the images of all the jewels in this manner, as will all of the other jewels. The images are repeated and multiplied in each other in a manner that is unbounded. Within the boundaries of a single jewel are contained the unbounded repetition and profusion of the images of all the jewels. The reflections are exceedingly clear and are completely unhindered.

The image is renowned because it captures so splendidly the great theme of Huayan Buddhism: the perfect realm of the Buddha, *li* (理, often translated as principle) is interfused with the

ordinary world, *shi* (事, which is ordinarily translated as event, affair, or thing). Each of the jewels in the net is a separate being, yet each contains reflections of all the others. A principle of harmony allows all to co-exist. Huayan philosophy is sometimes summarized in the slogan “all is one: one is all”: any part of the universe reflects the whole of noumenal reality (*li*). The forms of manifest reality (*shi*) are no more different from the abiding essence (*li*) than waves are different from water—appearance and reality, phenomenon and noumenon are essentially one. The thing itself manifests the truth of suchness: this is the profound insight that Chinese poets taught Pound, the Imagists, the Objectivists, and the English-language poets who took up their cause. The perfect integration of the thing itself manifests *li*.

Huayan metaphysics avoids the dualism between suchness (*chen-ju*) and the phenomenal world (事, *shi*). It offers a notion of one thing (理, *li*) manifesting itself as many (事, *shi*). In fact, Zanning’s (贊寧, 919–1001) 宋高僧傳 (*Song gaoseng zhuan*, Biographies of Eminent Monks, 988) tells a story about how Fa Zang illustrate the idea of a core reality manifesting itself wholly and completely in each of many separate things:

He took ten mirrors, arranging them, one each, at the eight compass points and above and below, in such a way that they were a little over ten feet apart from each other, all facing one another. He then placed a Buddhist figure in the center and illuminated it with a torch so that its image was reflected from one to another, all facing one another. He then placed a Buddhist figure in the center and illuminated it with a torch so that its image was reflected from one to another. His students thus came to understand the theory of the passing from ‘land to sea’ (the finite world) into infinity.

Yu-lan Fung notes of this example, “each mirror not only reflected the image of the other mirrors, but also all the images reflected each of those other mirrors.” The thing itself (*shi*) not only manifests the *li*, but also embodies in its form its interaction with all other *shi*, reflecting them into eternity. That infinite resonance is another lesson the English-language poets took from the Chinese—and we discern it Ball’s poetry.

Throughout his work, Ball has sought to impart the experience of those moments when the presence of a thing emerges as a luminous fact—when the finite (*shi*) is experienced as bodying forth *li* in its totality: then it manifests the governing harmony of all that is, and does so while remaining complete in itself. In such moments, that arrive only when one overcomes the ordinary tendency to mentally grasp hold of the object, the object seems to come forth into presence on its own. Chinese poetry traditionally conveyed this experience of the luminous completeness of the maximally specific fact, the thing itself (*shi*), which manifests in its being the harmony of the whole (*li*). Daoists use the term *ziran* (自然; lit. “self-such”), which could well be translated as “occurrence appearing of itself,” even though it is usually given simply as “nature” or “natural, spontaneous behaviour.” Moments when the self dissolves into the object-appearing-within-the-self are moments of quiet. This wonder at the self-presencing of reality is conveyed in Ball’s poetry. That way of experiencing implies a moral position. In fact, here epistemology, in its stress on harmony’s (*li*’s) guiding forms (*shi*) to their true order, is at once ethical and aesthetic: the tautness of Ball’s poems suggest the strict (non-causal) guidance through which things come to presence.

Among the documents that helped shape American writers’ ideas about Chinese verse was Fenollosa’s “The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry” (1919). It opined that “in reading Chinese we do not seem to be juggling mental counters, but to be watching things work out their own fate.” Fenollosa was a philosophy professor, and what he did in that essay, essentially, was to argue that Chinese language has built into it the assumption of a process

metaphysics—he argued that an underlying force gives shape to reality, and the Chinese language reflects that fact more truly than European languages. And, he implied, Chinese poetry reflects this truth best of all. That sense of the importance of poetry is implied in the visual layout of Ball’s poetry, which suggests that the creative act imitates (or embodies) that force—the Dao (道) or *dharmakya*—out of which contingent forms arise and to which they return when the form disintegrates. Indeed, this sense of the origination and the fate of beings is another implication of Ball’s startling use of the blank page.

The Buddhist concept of *dharmakāya* (which is sometimes referred to as *tathatā*, or suchness) resembles the pagan conception of the λόγος (logos) insofar as it guides the unfolding of the

universe. The *dharmakāya* “pervades the universe and manifests itself before all beings according to causality; nowhere is [it] not found, yet [it] is immovable from the seat of enlightenment.” *Dharmakāya* is by nature pure and tranquil, and though the phenomena of the world seem variegated, in reality they are all simply manifestations of a common underlying reality, in whose nature they partake.

These ideas are Buddhist, but they are not exclusively Buddhist—both Daoism and the Huayan (華嚴) School of Buddhism an idea of a process resembling *dharmakāya*. In Daoism, this process is called the Dao, or the Way, from which all things come. To be attuned to the Dao is to experience the mysterious process that is the final reality, and to experience as fully present, in every particular. The working of the Dao is characterized by *wu-wei* (无为, no action), spontaneity, non-interference, or allowing things to unfold as they will. To be attuned to the Dao is to live a life that is the opposite of grasping, or controlling (compare this with Zukofsky’s condemnation of writing that exercises “predatory intention”): by getting beyond grasping, one lives in the experience of the ultimate.

The neo-Confucian philosopher Zhu Xi (朱熹, 1130–1200) maintained that people are born with a rational (good) principle, *li* (理), intrinsic to their constitution. *Li* interacts with *qi* (氣), a fundamental life-energy, to produce the things of the natural world (including our bodies). *Qi* is material, and as such, it is subjected to the vagaries of experience; in the course of this experience, it becomes muddied. There was a job of mental cleansing to be done: to bring one’s mind back into alignment with *li*, Zhu Xi counselled “quiet sitting” and an investigation of things. He maintained that the mind (call it *qi*) is corrupted by grasping, and can be brought back to health by contemplation and the direct experience and acceptance of the transience of things. This is the deeper meaning of cleansing language, a central theme in Imagist and Objectivist poetics and in strains deriving from their ideas. Against the ruin of the world, there is only one defence—the creative act. Against the social lie, poetry seeks for a clarity of image and simplicity of language. It testifies to the importance of the moment when total, direct communication transforms itself into a complete identification—a boundless identification, without limits, of *shi* with *li* (and one *shi* with all other *shi*): that is the significance of direct, accurate awareness of the thing itself. This particular strain of Imagist and Objectivist-derived poetics testifies to the significance of a naked fact that can be apprehended in all its innocence, that (contrary to the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets’ practice) the unity between language and the world has not been broken. A poem is not an assembly of fragments, suggesting the projection of disjunctive images on the screen of the mind, seeking a wholeness they can never attain. It is the direct communication of what is.

The forms of Ball’s poems, at their best, track the process by which the experience of this boundless identification gathers itself together as it moves towards self-revelation. The sparseness of his poetic forms makes every image in Ball’s poems appear as a discrete and self-originating element, giving a sense of the independent and self-originating character of objects. They are not pushed into being by syntactic coercion: to the contrary, his poetic forms offer a series of semi-autonomous images, whose links to one another remain as mysterious as the



process by which an epiphany forms itself in consciousness.