

## What Does it Matter What Poetry Is?

David Paul Boaz

*What does it matter what poetry is, after all? All that matters is the eternal movement behind it.*

—Dylan Thomas

What is this movement that matters? How may the poem reveal it? Enjoy it? Praise it?

Energy (*prana, lung, ch'i, spiritus, pneuma*) arises from its basal source as light or motion, a flux of continuous change. This ground or basis of motion is changeless Reality Itself. It has many names. None can describe it. It is simply primordial awareness, Consciousness Being Itself, the very sourceground of the eternal mystery of all that is.

So energy arises as light, motion, change, matter, life, mind, breath, voice. This great mystery cannot be grasped by the mind. It is profound. It utterly transcends yet embraces the understanding. Thus, the understanding may touch it. As the great tradition of humanity's Primordial Wisdom Tradition attests, that Being Itself may be experienced directly as it is, prior to thought—concept and belief—by the feeling-emotional nature, at the Heart.

From such a ground the poem arises, with the mind, upon the breath, through the voice, witness to that primordial presence that all that is, arising as our relative spacetime realities, given each moment, each breath, from this primeval source of the great memory of our kind.

*The heart of the soul is where the inner world and the outer world come to meet. At this boundary, it is present at every point.*

—Novalis

Of this great mystery, the arising of light/energy/motion from its supreme source, there arises the Three Mysteries of the existence of Body, Voice and Mind. Voice is AH, the poem arising upon the breath-energy of the mind of the basal primordial awareness itself. Spirit-energy as voice links all beings together.

Voice—*vox, vak, vani*—is Sarasvati, goddess mother, wife of Brahma the Creator, mirror and witness to all that arises in this Interbeing that is Dōgen’s Being-Time. Voice is the Hermetic/Orphic/Vedic/Hebrew song of God, divine voice, *Corpus Hermeticum*, OM our body together, animated by breath of all beings in this numinous participation in nondual godhead. This voice sings of the Orphic transcendence of the dualities of the Apollonian and the Dionysian, of being and becoming, of all binaries in their luminous sourceground—*cittadhatu, Tao*—atavistic presence at the Heart (*HUM*). OM AH HUM. “Like that it is.”

For Nora Chadwick:

*Everywhere the gift of poetry is inseparable from divine inspiration. Everywhere this inspiration carries with it knowledge... uttered in poetry which is accompanied by music... music is everywhere the medium of communication with spirit.*

As form, our body arises from this perfectly subjective Spirit—*apeiron, Tao, shunyata* (emptiness)—Orphic voice as music/poetry reveals the truth of the mysteries: All things participate in That. We are not separate from That. Tat Tvam Ami, That, I Am!

*And if that of the earth betrays you, say to the still earth: I flow. To the rushing water speak: I am.*

—Rilke

For Sakyapa scholar-master Buton:

*The voice of the Buddha arises,  
being called forth by the mind  
of all living beings.*

Voice is mantra, breath of all-embracing Spirit descending and ascending throughout this great *kosmic* mandala, circulation of the light that holds us together in it. Voice is the instant self-liberating *Ah!* of experience. Voice is the shaman-poet-singer dwelling in mythtime at the root of attention, just prior to the world, in naked awareness, sings:

*Everything is alive!  
The trees, grasses, wind dancing,  
guides me. I understand  
the songs of the birds!*

Voice is wind, breath of many voices deep within us. Listen to this wind through the silence as it carries us across the deep night.

In the Tibetan Buddhist *Shambhala* teachings the essential energy that gives rise to these mysteries of Body, Voice and Mind is *Lungta*, the Windhorse. *Lung* (wind/*prana*/energy) may be harnessed and ridden (*ta*/horse) via the wisdom teachings (*sutras* and *tantras*). Thus is the wild horse of the mind tamed. And the result/fruition is *drasbu*, the realization of the numinous outshining prior unity of the apparent dualism of this continuum of arising energy forms. "Form is emptiness, emptiness is form." Upon this breath the voice of the poem arises.

At its heart, the poem, like the many truths appearing through it, is transparent allowing us "to see and keep what the understanding touches intact—as grapes are round and come in bunches" (William Carlos Williams). Thus the poem arises through the still bright mirror of mind, reflecting appearances, witness to the supreme source, abiding always at the heart, prior to the perennial drama of Narcissus, the egoic self-contraction, causal knot that is our thought and physical form. Here, the life in the poem reveals who we are. *Tat Tvam Asi*, That Thou Art. The poem lives us. "One no longer dreams, one is dreamed" (Henri Michaux).

Because the poem springs from the very sourceground that is Being Itself in whom life arises, and because it is given, received and then given again upon the very breath-energy of this Being, it must be life affirming.

*Poetry can do a hundred things... but there is only  
one thing that all poetry must do; it must praise all it  
can for being and for happening.*

—W.H. Auden

The poem reconstitutes the naked immediacy of that "eternal movement" of energy given to sensation, perception and cognition into "news," or pictures, a way of seeing, little truths earthed or anchored in feeling. "Only the heart endures." The natural, innate intelligence of the poem, its form, its grace, its internal gravity exists in relation or tension with the naked image or idea of the thing directly perceived, *samadhi* of the *ding an sich*, the pristine, untainted neumenal thing-in-itself. This priority of image and idea, subject and object, *noumenon* and phenomenon is the *relationship* of the poem. Ultimately, it is the dualism of this very relationship that we transcend on the transmental breeze that is the breath of the poem. The poem points to or intends the great Source, yet this source is not transcendent, but abides at the Heart as the always already present now of every arising form. Thus the poem itself cannot transcend everyday reality, and avoids transcendental logocentric absolutes (God). But it can illuminate the beauty of the natural things—ordinary mind—that is everyday reality. "Leave it as it is and rest your weary mind. All things are perfect exactly as they are" (Shakumuni, the Buddha).

*The trouble with most poetry is that it is either subjective or objective.*

—Basho

The poem prefers the naked natural image or idea of that perceived, to the abstract concept, ideal or sentiment of it. Abstraction betrays the natural direct image or idea.

*Arising, musically, the diaphanous idea itself, the flower missing form all bouquets... To name the object is to delete three-quarters of the enjoyment of the poem... to suggest, to evoke, this is what charms the imagination... the poem is a mystery through which the reader finds his own way.*

—Mallarmè

"My understanding has nothing to do with your understanding, (Hakuin Zenji).

For Wordsworth, the movement of this primordial energy through nature's forms "were all like workings of one mind, the features of the same face, blossoms upon one tree..." For Baudelaire, "nature is a temple where living pillars let secret words escape..." For Blake, "Energy is Eternal Delight."

Because the poem is given to be given again, "a poem on a page is only half a poem." To get the poem off the page it must be voiced, by the poet, or by the reader.

*"Each poem is a performance as well as a script, the performance being both a realization and a criticism of the text."*

—James Scully

The poem in this relation requires an opening to receive what is directly given, before it can be given again in the poem. This opening is prior to expression. This opening is a choice. Grasping, clinging and cognitive or spiritual seeking are not the poem. *Poesis* is process, not substance; receptive, not creative; nondual primordial wisdom (*gnosis, jnana*), not mere dualistic knowledge; openness, not activity; path, not goal. Thus the poem arises as we open, just for a moment to receive, surrender (*wu wei, pistis/faith*) and relax into the presence (*vidya*) of that always present, this primordial awareness ground that is our own original face. Here the poem is purely transparent, luminous and bright beyond the dualism—the binaries of relationship, of subject and object, you and me, spirit and matter. This post-transcendental, postmetaphysical understanding was told by Soto Zen Patriarch Dōgen 800 years ago:

*Midnight. No waves  
no wind. The empty boat  
flooded with moonlight.*

—Dōgen Zenji

Thus the poem is Nemerov's "Protean Encounter", our coming to meet with the shape-shifting formless form of the eternal truths arising from transconceptual, nondual Spirit Itself. It is our primordial awareness wisdom that recognizes this wisdom

presence—by whatever name— deep within each human Heart. All this, without excluding past and future, in the timeless now, through these little pictures that are the poem. These truths transmitted through the poem may be viewed as "what oft was thought, but ne'er so well expressed." (Pope). The truth of the poem is, for Keats, a remembrance "of one's own highest thoughts."

*The work of art has always been to demonstrate and celebrate the interconnectedness: not to make everything "one" but to make the "many" authentic, to help illuminate it all."*

—Gary Snyder

Although the world's religions derive from sacred poetry, the poem itself cannot be conventionally or exoterically religious, and offers no consoling message or doctrinaire idea or image of the divine to which we may cling. Such a feelgood poem may serve as an appealing or inspiring sentiment, but cannot transmit the nondual, transconceptual ego-self-transcending truth that is our heart's desire. Yet, it is the esoteric/mystical tradition of the world's religions—religion as *religio*, yoga, union of spirit and matter—that provides the Orphic ideal of sacred, participatory self-transcending art that is the very essence of the poem itself.

*It is the privilege of poetry to preserve us from mistaking our notions either for things or for ourselves. Poetry is the completest mode of utterance.*

—I.A. Richards

Indeed, such art offers a brief antidote to those two great ego-ethnocentric evils of the modern/postmodern age: the separative violent dualism of religious provincialism, and life-denying, spirit-denying massmind Scientific Materialism (Scientism).

*The greatest poetry sings always, at the end, of transcendence; while seeing clearly and saying plainly the wickedness and terror and beauty of the world, it is at the same time humming to itself, so that one overhears rather than hears: All will be well.*

—Howard Nemerov

Yet, in order to suggest this ultimate truth of the ontic prior perfection of arising spacetime reality, poetry must also speak to the *relative truth* of the subtle impermanence of all things of the world, and to the fearful, destructive denial of this, the denial of our own death.

For Soto Zen Patriarch Dōgen Zenji, light energy motion is but an eternal continuum of the moment to moment arising, abiding and passing away—the change—that is being in time.

“Being is time.” For our Great Wisdom Tradition then, being in the world is this temporal continuum of impermanent finite phenomenal reality arising from its infinite, changeless primordial awareness matrix base, our “supreme source”—by whatever name,—that is infinite Being Itself. And arising herein is our diaphanous impermanence that is the very essence of life and therefore of the Beautiful; is the soul of art, and of the poem itself. Thus does the poem reveal and celebrate this unborn, deathless luminous nature of mind, in the brightest and simplest of ways.

There are many ways of conceiving the poem. The history of criticism is full of them. Novalis speaks of the two stages of the self-expression of the poem: “The first stage is introspection; exclusive contemplation of the self. The second stage must be authentic observation outward, spontaneous sober observation of the external world.” These two stages or aspects of the poem are the two faces of self-transcendence: self-observation, inward and upward (meditation/*dhyana*, *zazen*, *gom*), and compassionate ethical conduct, downward and outward (*zenkan*, *gsal rig*, *gyodba*), into the everyday lifeworld of sentient beings. The first stage is inward, non-conceptual contemplation and meditation upon the primordial wisdom presence—by whatever name—that is our actual identity. The second stage is bringing the “heaven” of this

divine nature, into the "earth" of everyday lifeworld compassionate thought, speech and action; realizing and demonstrating the presence of our divine nature while "hewing wood and carrying water." And doing poetry. "What you are is what you have been; what you will be is what you do now" (Shakyamuni Buddha).

In due course, in the poem and in the individual, Narcissus, the self-limiting ego-I, and the selfless *mahatman* that is our actual noself are known to be identical, which was their essential nature from the very beginning. This is the nondual view. "Seeing into one's self-nature is seeing into emptiness (*shunyata*)" (Hui-Neng). "Without past, present, future; empty awake mind" (Mipham Rinpoche).

Initially, the first stage is narcissistic. We are absorbed in ourselves, desiring, seeking something, reduced and seduced by our addictions to the material mass culture comfort zones of "not hearing" and "not seeing." When the poem arises at, or matures into the nondual merging of the first and second stages, the egoic self cannot understand it. Here we long for the intense, the dramatic, the romantic, the beautiful, the conceptual or the ideal. We long for the comfortable but separate self-stimulating "I" of the poem. Egoic touchstone. Here the poem urges us to leave the house and enter in its numinous, transcendent brightness, beyond the trappings of our human sentimental and conceptual *impedimenta*. Here the poem mirrors its bright source behind or ontically prior to the reflected shadowy movement of its objects. Here, knowing subject and object known are not independent. Are not separate. Through the poem, just for a moment, we can be the mirror! Too often we stay in the house.

*The poet's eye, in a fine frenzy rolling, doth glance  
from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven.*

—Wm. Shakespeare

When Rilke understood that his poems lacked the authentic, transcendent "seeing" (*satori, zenkan*) of the images of the objects of the external world, he began his "seeing poems," and lost

much of his following. But the images and poems became transparent, and revealed little pith pictures of their bright source.

In the initial narcissism of the first stage, the poem often omits the object, or the image of the object altogether; or the direct "thing in itself" is lost midway to the intuitive, introspective "I."

*If the senses are called upon only to embody intuition  
about ourselves, they die. They don't want to be  
slaves of our intuition.*

—Robert Bly

*I should be content to look at a mountain for what it  
is, and not a comment on my life.*

—David Ignatow

Thus the "I poem" gives us "news" of the primordial voice of the mind as intuited by the fearful, grasping compensatory egoic structures of the personality-self. The I poem grounds itself in the realm of Narcissus, the ego-I, which is old news insofar as the ego, by definition, has separated itself from the supreme source of the mind—by whatever name— through which it arises. The I poem often reveals this aesthetic ego, the antithesis of participatory self-transcending art. Such art is all too rare.

The human realm is truly interesting only as a part, a participation or an outpicturing of natural things, that profound and ultimate mystery of nature, that luminous empty silence through which nature's appearances arise. The subtle, emotive spontaneous context of the poem itself must intend That (*Tat/Sat*).

*Only that which does not teach, which does not cry  
out, which does not persuade, which does not conde-  
scend, which does not explain, is irresistible.*

—W.B. Yeats.

Such a poem, in contrast to the I poem, is a "mind poem" in that it does not derive from the fear and desire of Narcissus, the ego-I. It does not seek to teach, persuade, enhance or dramatize. It seeks nothing at all. Rather, the mind poem reveals and transmits news of the primordial source of the mind, little pictures of

the great mystery of the essence of the luminous nature of mind that is ontologically interdependent Being Itself (Interbeing) in which or in whom this all arises. The mind poem intends and is grounded in, and facilitates our participation, recognition then realization of *That*. Why? Because that is our actual identity. *That* is who we are.

*Everything is already accomplished. The nature of mind is Buddha from the beginning.*

—Garab Dorje

If all nature, everything, is Buddha from the beginning, then the poem is ordinary, "nothing special" (*wu shin*). "The ideas of a poet should be noble and simple" (Tu Fu).

This apparent self that is Narcissus does not live in reality. It dwells in its self-created mythology, the skeptical and alienated *mythos* of the commodified materialist massmind. While the dualistic intelligence of Narcissus identifies and defends the limits of its habitual perceptual, conceptual and belief systems, the mind poem provides an antidote: the "beginners mind" (*shoshin*) the momentary "bracketing" (*epoché*) or placing in abeyance of our constitutive cognitive operations upon reality, such that we may open to receive what reality gives directly, prior to the filtering of it through the atavistic logical and conceptual elaborations and operations of the linear, bivalent, bipolar perceptual and conceptual cognitive structures from which our dualistic languages are derived. "Who are you between two thoughts?" Who is it that shines through the mind and abides at the heart of all beings, forever liberated and fully awake? The mind poem intends *That*.

The mind poem then, may transcend the ego-I, its destructive denial of death, and even the mind itself, referring or pointing back to that presence which is always present (*vidya*), witness to that numinous matrix/base of the mind itself. Here egoic existence and the very essence or nature of mind are a prior unity. And now, at last we can see it, and know it, and be it beyond any doubt. The mind poem intends *That*.

The mind poem may be a poem of images of things, or a poem of ideas, objective or subjective, but it always refers to or intends or notices in some small way, directly, beyond sentiment, concept or belief, through natural things the great mystery that is given nakedly and directly to the mind through the senses and the Heart. This inherent intentionality of the poem does not require or presuppose any epistemology or ontology, or any conceptual structure, elaboration or dilemma whatsoever. It is simply the transconceptual, pristine, direct and subtle witnessing or praising of the self-liberated movement/ energy of this great mystery that is the interdependent, unseparate bright source of mind, precisely at the instant of its arising, and nothing more. It is merely *That*, that is to be experienced and realized through the poem itself.



*Pictures From Cathedral Peak* is a selection of little pictures of that great mystery; little mind poems, and didactic I poems, arising upon the voice of the mind, bright mirror of *That* which abides just prior, *That* which transcends yet embraces it, deep in the silence in whom everything arises.

Cathedral Peak is a great granite spire arising from the California High Sierra, just across the trail from Cathedral Lake—a magical, pristine alpine lake—two day’s hike or ski from Yosemite Valley. Cathedral Peak is a place in the mind where this presence of the primordial source of the mind is strong and bright.