**Zukofsky, Louis (1904-1978)**

Born to working-class, Orthodox Jewish, Yiddish-speaking parents in the Lower East Side of New York City, Louis Zukofsky was an American avant-garde poet active from the 1920s through the 1970s. Zukofsky’s masterwork long poem, *“A*,*”* along with his many other shorter works of poetry and prose, had a profound effect on the shape and development of American poetics. His work has can be counted as a major influence on the Black Mountain, Beat, Language and other contemporary poets who work in conversation with the historical avant-garde. Major themes in Zukofsky’s work include the materiality of language, formalism, the place of the poem in history and politics, the musical structure of poesis and vice-versa, and translation.

Zukofsky’s poetic career began following his graduation with a Master’s in English from Columbia University. A parody of T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, entitled *Poem Beginning ‘The’”* received the admiration of Ezra Pound. The poem features at least one of Zukofsky’s signature formal strategies: the strategic parataxis of high and low cultures placed in the service of an anti-reactionary, and sometimes Marxist and revolutionary, avant-garde poetics. Zukofsky’s epistolary relationship with Pound was extensive and the older poet would be a lifelong object of admiration, and negation, for Zukofsky.

In 1931, Zukofsky edited a special issue of *Poetry* magazine, in which he inaugurated a current he would call “Objectivism.” The “Objectivist” poets contained in the issue convened loosely around the principles of 1) language as a material signifier that mediates our relationship to the world 2) a fidelity to “historical particulars” and 3) a shared progressive politics. Other poets associated with “Objectivism” include George Oppen, Carl Rakosi, Lorine Niedecker, Basil Bunting, W.C. Williams and Charles Reznikoff. Throughout the 1930s Zukofsky, worked on the 5th through 9th sections of *“A*,*”* and wrote material that would later appear in the important collections *55 Poems* and *Anew*. The 1930s also saw Zukofsky’s most sustained engagements with Marxism; the first half of “*A”*-9 takes the form of a canzone voiced by commodities, and the sestina “Mantis,” in which the eponymous insect embodies revolutionary possibility, incorporates material that Zukofsky wrote for the *New Masses*.

In the post-Depression era, Zukofsky’s work would incorporate new subjects, and new formal strategies. Work on *“A”* continued through the 1970s, with pauses both long and short separating the sections. Sections of *“A”* written after a pause between 1940 to 1948 weave together the personal theatre of Zukofsky’s family with historical, political and world events. A range of formal experiments appear, including collage, mathematical architectures of sound and pattern, and a polyphonic libretto accompanying a masque (“A”-24). In addition to writing *“A*,*”* and several books of shorter poems, Zukofsky also wrote significant works of nonfiction, prose and translations. Readers seeking the poet’s statements on poetry and poetics, including his seminal “Program: “Objectivists” 1931,” will find them collected in *Prepositions +: The Collected Critical Essays* (Wesleyan, 2001). Zukofsky’s interest in Shakespeare led to a two-volume work that blends literary criticism, poetics, aesthetics and philosophy, *Bottom: On Shakespeare*, written between 1947 and 1960 in close collaboration with his wife, Celia Thaew Zukfofsky. In the 1960s, Zukofsky published two novels, in addition to his creative, phonic translations of Catullus, the latter, again, a collaboration with Celia Thaew.

Zukofsky died in 1978, and a book of poems, *80 Flowers*, was published posthumously.

List of Key Works

* (Editor) *An "Objectivists" Anthology,* To Publishers, 1932.
* *A Test of Poetry*, Objectivist Press, 1948.
* *Ferdinand, Including "It Was,"* Grossman, 1968.
* (Trans. L. Zukofsky and C. Zukofsky) *Catullus,* Grossman, 1969.
* *Little: For Careenagers*, Grossman, 1970.
* *“A*”, University of California Press, 1978.
* *80 Flowers,* Stinehour Press, 1978.
* *Pound/Zukofsky: Selected Letters of Ezra Pound and Louis Zukofsky.* Ed. Barry Ahearn. NY: New Directions, 1987.
* *Complete Short Poetry,* Johns Hopkins U P, 1991.
* *Prepositions +: The Collected Critical Essays*. Ed. Mark Scroggins. Wesleyan UP, 2000.

References and Further Reading

* Terrell, Carroll F., editor, *Louis Zukofsky: Man and Poet,* U of Maine P, 1979.
* Ahearn, Barry, *Zukofsky's "A": An Introduction,* U of California P, 1983.
* Leggott, Michele J., *Reading Zukofsky's "80 Flowers,"* Johns Hopkins U P, 1989.
* Perelman, Bob, *The Trouble with Genius: Reading Pound, Joyce, Stein, and Zukofsky,* U of California P, 1994.
* Scroggins, Mark, *Upper Limit Music: The Writings of Louis Zukofsky,* U of Alabama P, 1997.
* Davidson, Michael. *Ghostlier Demarcations: Modern Poetry and the Material Word*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1997.
* Scroggins, Mark. *Louis Zukofsky and the Poetry of Knowledge.* U of Alabama P, 1998.
* DuPlessis, Rachel Blau, and Quartermain, Peter, eds. *The Objectivist Nexus: Essays in Cultural Poetics*. Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P, 1999.
* Scroggins, Mark.*The Poem of a Life: A Biography of Louis Zukofsky*. Shoemaker Hoard, 2007
* Jennison, Ruth. *The Zukofsky Era: Modernity, Margins and the Avant-Garde,* Johns Hopkins U P, 2012.

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