**The Objectivists**

The Objectivist poets were a group of first- and second-generation modernist writers who emerged in the United States during the 1930s. The writers most commonly associated with the movement are Louis Zukofsky, who first used the term “objectivist” to describe poetry, Charles Reznikoff, George Oppen, Charles Rakosi, the British poet Basil Bunting, and Lorine Niedecker, although other poets, such as William Carlos Williams, were published under the banner. Most objectivist writing was characterized by an attention to specific particulars and the belief that poems could be material or social objects. Beyond these broad tendencies, however, each writer associated with the movement offered different definitions of “objectivist,” and developed divergent writing practices. Consequently, the term has historical, critical, and evolutionary senses, referring both to specific literary publications, a core of poets whose relationships and affinities continued beyond the early 1930s, and the many subsequent attempts by poets and critics to use “objectivist” as a critical concept.

**History**

In 1931, Louis Zukofsky guest-edited an issue of *Poetry* magazine dedicated to new American writing. The chief editor, Harriet Monroe, invited Zukofsky to take on the project at the prompting of Ezra Pound, one of Zukofsky’s correspondents and mentors. Although Monroe gave Zukofsky editorial freedom, she encouraged him to develop a label or term for the new poetry, following the tradition of the many avant-gardes of previous decades. Zukofsky consequently entitled the issue “‘Objectivists’ 1931,” including two critical essays outlining his theories: “Program: ‘Objectivists’ 1931” and “Sincerity and Objectification: With Special Reference to the Work of Charles Reznikoff.”

The poets included in the volume, ranging from Whittaker Chambers to William Carlos Williams, were surprised by the term, and the reactions to Zukofsky’s program varied. Some writers rejected the title, while others embraced it, most notably Reznikoff, George Oppen, and Charles Rakosi. Along with Zukofsky, Basil Bunting, and Lorine Niedecker, who began a correspondence and friendship with Zukofsky after reading the special issue of *Poetry*, these poets are often treated as the key Objectivists.

Other publications under the banner would soon follow. An expansion of the *Poetry* issue was printed as *An “Objectivists” Anthology* (1932) and, later, Zukofsky, Reznikoff, and George and Mary Oppenfounded the Objectivist Press. The resulting publications reflect the movement’s connections to other modernists, including a collection of poems by Williams with an introduction by Wallace Stevens, and Reznikoff’s prose work *Testimony* (1934), with an introduction by the critic Kenneth Burke.

After this initial formation, the individual careers of the Objectivists took different paths, and the term was interpreted in various ways. Zukofsky’s position toward the label became increasingly ambivalent; indeed, he wrote as early as 1932 that the focus of the “Objectivists” issue of *Poetry* was “the craft of poetry, NOT [. . .] a movement.” His dedication to craft led him to publish poetry, criticism, and translations throughout his life, most notably his long poem *A*, finished in 1974. So, too, did Reznikoff, whose short lyrics had epitomized, for Zukofsky, the key objectivist value of “sincerity.” Reznikoff’s late major work, *Testimony* (1965), a return to the materials of the early prose volume, clearly departs from the early sparse, compressed lyrics while expanding sincerity as a literary practice. Niedecker and Bunting continued to write, although in different social and geographical contexts: Niedecker remained in her native Wisconsin while Bunting lived and wrote throughout the world.

The history of the Objectivists is further complicated by periods of silence: both Oppen and Rakosiabandoned poetry for several decades. In Oppen’s case, this was motivated by his leftist political commitments; the McCarthy investigations prompted him to flee to Mexico for a number of years. Indeed, leftist politics was an important cultural context for the entire movement, despite the fact that most Objectivists eschewed explicit political didacticism in their poetry. Instead, political themes and topics typically emerge as, in Zukofsky’s formulation, one of many “historic and contemporary particulars.”

In 1968, the critic L.S. Dembo interviewed “Four Objectivists” for the journal *Contemporary Literature*—Zukofsky, Oppen, Reznikoff, and Rakosi. Each offered different interpretations of “Objectivist,” further complicating a critical definition of the practice.

**Practice**

In general, the Objectivists regarded language as a material social fact, rejecting, like other modernists, idealist definitions of poetry. They revised and extended Pound’s early emphasis on the image by focusing on “particulars.” As Zukofsky wrote in his preface to *An Objectivist Anthology*, poems only engage particulars and, in doing so, “become particulars themselves.” Thus, two senses of “Objectivist” are evident: an interest with objects and language external to the perceiving, “subjective” mind, and a desire to transform the poem itself into an object. In an earlier essay, Zukofsky offered a variation on these concepts, describing them as “sincerity,” wherein writing is composed that “thinks with things” and “objectification,” the “rested totality” of the poem as a satisfying form. By thinking with things and crafting poetic form out of those distinct relations, the Objectivists often resisted metaphorical or symbolic abstraction, preferring instead the discrete and historically specific.

The actual practice of the Objectivists themselves was quite diverse. Reznikoff, for instance, developed a poetic of spoken, daily language coupled with the transparent precision of the “witness,” as the term is uses in a court of law. This variant of sincerity achieved its most radical form in the late *Testimony* and *Holocaust* (1975), based on legal transcriptions from US court cases and the Nuremberg trials. Zukofsky’s work, on the other hand, was marked by more formal complexity, including experiments with traditional poetic forms, numerical structures, and sonically rich composition. From his early long lyric “Poem Beginning ‘The’” (1926), which included references as a parody of T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, to his late homophonic translations of Catullus, Zukofsky’s work reflected a profound engagement with multiple literary traditions. The seventh section of his long poem *A*, for instance, is written as a sonnet sequence, while his poem “A Mantis,” a reflection on class struggle, takes the form of a sestina. Between these two extremes of Objectivist practice, one could situate Oppen. The short, dense lyrics of *Discrete Series* (1934) at times approach Zukofsky in terms of modernist difficulty, while his later long poem “Of Being Numerous” blends Reznikoff’s attention to particulars with philosophical meditation.

Notably, these three poets, along with Rakosi, were all Jewish, and the Objectivists are also significant for bringing this cultural heritage into American modernism. Reznikoff wrote dramatic monologues retelling Biblical narratives and Jewish history, while Zukofsky, rejecting orthodox beliefs, inflected English through Yiddish and Hebrew sounds. These concerns brought inevitable tensions, particularly in light of the anti-Semitism of other modernists, and the critic Stephen Fredman has recently identified these challenges as “the Jewish dilemmas of Objectivist poetry.”

As a result of the many differences between the poets, and the complex social and historical circumstances surrounding their work, including their Jewish affiliations and their leftist commitments, the term “objectivist” is best understood as a flexible category. Critics Rachel Blau DuPlessis and Peter Quartermain coined the phrase “objectivist nexus” to acknowledge this literary and cultural dynamic, an aesthetic and social formation running through the larger history of modernism.

**Select Criticism**

Rachel Blau DuPlessisand Peter Quartermain, editors, *The Objectivist Nexus: Essays in Cultural Poetics* (Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P, 1999).

Stephen Fredman, *A Menorah for Athena: Charles Reznikoff and the Jewish Dilemmas of Objectivist Poetry* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2001).

Mark Scroggins, *The Poem of A Life: A Biography of Louis Zukofsky* (Berkeley: Shoemaker and Hoard, 2007).