**Ruth Jennison**

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

Louis Zukofsky was an American avant-garde poet active from the 1920s through the 1970s. Zukofsky’s masterwork long poem, *“A”* (in company 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, and Language poets, and on other contemporary poets working 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.

[Note that the double quotation marks in *“A”* are a part of the original title.]

Zukofsky was born to working-class, Orthodox Jewish, Yiddish-speaking parents in the Lower East Side of New York City. His poetic career began following his graduation from Columbia University with an MA in English. A parody of T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, entitled ‘Poem Beginning “The”’,received the admiration of Ezra Pound. The poem features one of Zukofsky’s signature formal techniques: the strategic parataxis (juxtaposition) 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 poetic current he would call Objectivism. The Objectivist poets contained in the issue convened loosely around the following principles:

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[[1]](#footnote-1) takes the form of a canzone (ballad) 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. His work on *“A”* continued through the 1970s, with pauses both long and short separating the sections. The sections of *“A”* written after a pause between 1940 and 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 and prose, and innovative 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 blending literary criticism, poetics, aesthetics, and philosophy: *Bottom: On Shakespeare*, written between 1947 and 1960 in close collaboration with his wife, Celia Thaew Zukofsky. In the 1960s, Zukofsky published two novels, in addition to his creative, phonic translations of Catullus, the latter also a collaboration with Celia Thaew. Zukofsky died in 1978. 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

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Perelman, Bob, *The Trouble with Genius: Reading Pound, Joyce, Stein, and Zukofsky,* U of California P, 1994.

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1. The sections of *“A”* are referred to as *“A”-*1, *“A”-*2, etc. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)