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An “Objectivists” Anthology: from Manifesto to Tradition

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An "Objectivists" Anthology : du manifeste à la tradition

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Abstract

Il s'agit dans cet article de présenter An "Objectivists" Anthology *(1932) du poète américain Louis Zukofsky en évaluant l'aspect polémique du discours qui le définit, et ce d'abord au regard de son évolution en tant que projet éditorial (1931-32). Ensuite sera examiné le parcours critique de cette anthologie dans la poésie américaine au vingtième siècle : entre site de marginalisation dans les années trente et l'émergence d'une tradition du retour à l'avant-garde dans les années soixante-dix. Dans quelle mesure la continuité d'une écriture « objectiviste » ne se révèle-t-elle pas comme modèle dans la pratique contemporaine ? Enfin, à supposer que les caractéristiques rhétoriques de l'anthologie suggèrent un rapprochement avec le genre translittéraire du manifeste, des commentaires visant des prémisses idéologiques et polémistes de cette anthologie viennent étayer cette hypothèse, ainsi qu'une réflexion sur la capacité d'une éthique objectiviste à s'incarner dans l'identité de la poésie contemporaine.*



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An "Objectivists" Anthology: from Manifesto to Tradition

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Louis Zukofsky's *An "Objectivists" Anthology* (1932) points to a chronicle of revisions and a long narrative of influence that can be traced to the present day. It belongs to a strain of twentieth-century poetry anthologies, beginning with Ezra Pound's 1914 *Des Imagistes: an Anthology*, which conflate the commemoration of a given body of work with a critique of the discourses of cultural hegemony. Zukofsky's anthology follows this pattern, acting as a vehicle both for disapproval of publishing houses and in praise of small magazines, whose issues include some of the poetry rejected by the dominant literary circles of the time. The editorial stance reflects the position of a marginalized poet establishing his role, along with that of other poets such as Charles Reznikoff, Charles Rakosi and William Carlos Williams, as the representative of a group of poets standing outside current literary modes. From a perspective defined by the poet's unease with the culture and the politics of the time, Zukofsky's poetic platform begins by affirming the need for a greater attentiveness to the language of poetry and an acute awareness of the perceptual realities that shape one's immediate circumstances. This article will consider how Zukofsky's activity as an anthologist in the 1930s shaped the position he would come to occupy in literary history as a poet, critic and as a literary theorist. It will be argued that the direction the anthology was to take with Zukofsky evolved from its original role as a site for marginalized voices in American poetry only to grow into a site from which would emerge a tradition for subsequent generations of American avant-garde poets.

From the perspective of literary history, the Objectivists have been associated with an essay composed in a polemical vein akin to that of Pound's "A Few Don'ts" (1913)—"Program: 'Objectivists' 1931"—before

being identified, beginning in the 1970s, as the basis for a "tradition" of the kind Charles Altieri outlined in a 1979 essay. "The Objectivist Tradition", as Altieri defined it, has done much to associate the poets Zukofsky selected for his 1931 presentation with the transmission of an identifiable model. As for more recent appraisals of Objectivist poetry, they indicate that poets and critics alike agree to assign it a lasting influence inside and outside of the United States. The 1999 collection of essays entitled *The Objectivist Nexus* is a case in point. Eight of the book's contributors are poets, including the British poet Andrew Crozier and the French poet and translator, Yves di Manno. In the same collection, Burton Hatlen, the poet and former editor of *Sagetrieb*, a journal devoted to scholarly and critical work on poetry in the Imagist and Objectivist tradition, argues that the Objectivists have been a model and an inspiration for America's "most influential avant-garde" (54). He evaluates their influence with respect to their role as a "subculture" working against the rising political and cultural power of mass media in the twentieth century. Their marginality, he goes on to suggest, places the Objectivists' resistance to dominant cultures alongside that of late nineteenth-century European cenacles — the Pre-Raphaelites in England, the Symbolists in France — and the solitary conviction of American writers such as Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson (48). As for Charles Altieri, in 1999, twenty years after his first essay, he was to rank Objectivist poetry as one of the "two basic imaginative frameworks" behind contemporary American experimental poetry, the other according to his argument being the New York School (*Nexus*, 301).

Reactions to the Objectivists in the 1930s, however, were more ambiguous. For the most part, they called upon Zukofsky, as the representative of this "subculture", to defend the place he had carved out for himself and other poets. In an effort to understand Zukofsky's role as the instigator and architect of a first gathering of Objectivist poets, the polemical vein of the anthology begs to be considered from the vantage point of its evolution as an editorial project. The latter begins with Zukofsky's initial presentation and selection of poetry as a critic and a poet in his 1931 Objectivist "Program", to end with the subsequent presentation, entitled "Recencies", which would appear in the 1932 anthology along with an abridged version of the "Program" in the appendix[1]. From the very start, the format Zukofsky chose in 1931 prompted indignant responses from readers wanting the editor to place the poetry by Charles Reznikoff, Carl Rakosi, Basil Bunting, George Oppen, Kenneth Rexroth, Robert McAlmon, William Carlos Williams, himself and others within the context of a tradition: "How is Objectivism

[1] In Zukofsky's 1967 collection of essays, entitled *Prepositions*, a revised version of the essays from 1931 and 1932 appeared under the title "An Objective".

related to past poetry. Is it a new ramification (such as Dadaism, Jemenfoutism, Surrealism, for instance) […] ?" one reader was to ask in the April 1931 edition of *Poetry* (53). Zukofsky's exasperation was apparent in his response: "Poetry is 'past' or 'news' only to historians of literature and to certain lay readers; to poets (craftsmen in the art of poetry) and to competent critics, poetry" (55). And to the question: "Is Objectivist poetry a programmed movement (such as the Imagists instituted) [...]?" (53), his reply was equally terse: "To those interested in programmed movements 'Objectivist' poetry will be a programmed movement" (55).

His reluctance to engage in a debate in the back pages of *Poetry* magazine is first a reminder of the difficulty of his editorial enterprise – presenting poetry from mostly unknown writers – after seeing his own work rejected by the literary circles of the time[2]. Secondly, Zukofsky's pragmatism is not to be underestimated, if weighed against the prompting of the kind he would receive from Ezra Pound: "The thing is to get out something as good as *Des Imagistes* by any bloody means at your disposal" (*Selected Letters*, 24 Oct. 1930). We are reminded once again of the urgency underlying the entire undertaking when reading the review William Carlos Williams provided of Zukofsky's *Anthology* in 1933. In his contribution to *The Symposium* magazine, Williams argues that the affiliation binding these poets together is derived from a "gesture of collaboration, infuriating to nearly all writers …" (117). This, he goes on to explain, "… is more important than the particular success of the pieces which have been used for the exercise" (117).

It seems legitimate to ask what collaborative gesture the Objectivists were a part of when one of its members was quick to underline the aesthetic shortcomings of the poetry assembled? Williams's assessment equally draws attention to the fact that the *Anthology* is keenly perceived as a self-conscious effort to create a network of poets. Not to exceed the sobering limits of an "exercise" in "collaboration", the *Anthology,* in Williams's review, appears at best to be a necessary editorial evil. Though Williams was to engage his own responsibility on the editorial board of the contemporaneous venture of To Publishers, later The Objectivist Press, the responsibility for the earlier endeavors would appear to lie essentially with Zukofsky. With the support of Harriet Monroe of *Poetry* magazine[3], Zukofsky used his position as editor

[2] Eliot Cohen, one of editors of *The Menorah Journal*, had rejected Zukofsky's first essay as a spokesperson for the Objectivists in 1930: "Charles Reznikoff: Sincerity and Objectification". A review he had submitted in 1929 of another poet, Max Brody, met the same fate and was never published by the Jewish-American humanist journal.

[3] In 1932 Zukofsky would once again avail himself of editorial support, in this instance from George and Mary Oppen, who were running a small press out of Le Beausset, Var (France): To Publishers. When the anthology was printed in Dijon, France (Imprimerie Darantière), the

to make available the work of a network of writers he believed to have been much neglected by the publishing houses of the time, some of whom would nevertheless lose their association with the Objectivist label in later years: Mary Butts, Frances Fletcher, Forrest Anderson, R.B.N. Warriston. In the first pages of his 1931 "Program", American publishers are rebuked for promoting what he calls, in a Poundian vein, "pseudo-kulchuh" and, at the same time, he praises small magazines for showing interest in what is described as "the materials of poetry" (271). Zukofsky's insistence upon the deficiencies of other poetry contributes to the essay's argumentative, manifesto-like tone as well. There is a strong sense of urgency in Zukofsky's argument, as Michael Heller points out, which foregrounds his commitment to the ethical role perceived to be that of poets working as the "unacknowledged legislators of social and political life" (7). In short, the complaint shaped in this essay is directed against poetry failing to perform both as a mode of observation and interestingly, in what calls forth a significant strain in contemporary American poetry, as a mode of thought.

The set of principles presented in 1931 were to be reiterated in an abbreviated form in 1932 in an appendix to the anthology. Despite the decision to have the initial "Program" play a lesser role in the anthology, the essay the reader is presented with upon opening the anthology is reminiscent of the expository mode of 1931. William Carlos Williams re-enacts this mode in even more colourful terms in his 1933 review of the anthology. The comments made at this time draw most convincingly upon the combativeness of the manifesto style and flavour: "There is nothing here that seductively takes us up—as a man might carry a child. Nor is reason used to cudgel the mind into unwilling submission. The attack is by simple presentation, perhaps confrontation would be the better term" (*Symposium* 116). "Recencies", Zukofsky's preface to the anthology, is more measured than the "attack" Williams refers to; however, it is clear in its intention to vindicate the author's position after the volley of criticism prompted by the 1931 "Program": "The intention of this is not to object on behalf of the February 1931 issue of Poetry (Chicago) but to offer some explanations" (9). The subjects of contention Zukofsky proceeds to broach in this introduction bring to light the manner in which his work as a poet and a critic fundamentally overlaps. In particular Zukofsky's position as precursor for later generations of American poets is manifest in his vision of the poet's role as a heterogeneous one that embraces all forms of intelligence and is not to be excluded from economic and social realities:

initiative was largely funded by the Oppens, for whom Zukofsky was working as a salaried editor.

> But a critic-poet-analyst is interested in growing degrees of intelligence. He has an economic bias. He has been doing a job. It will perhaps as soon as not be his salvation. He does not pretend it to be more than a job. Guillaume de Poitiers had several jobs. He was a poet. He went to war. Obviously he divided his energy, perhaps, perhaps not, to the hindrance of his poetry. At any rate—poetry defined as a job, a piece of work. (14)

The remaining thrust of Zukofsky's discussion in "Recencies" directs attention to the heterogeneity that is also assigned to poetic form and content. Zukofsky outlines a defense of metapoetic discourse, offering up the example of analytic comment in the sixth movement of his poem *A* (9-10): "An objective—rays of the object brought to a focus, / An objective—nature as creator—desire for what is objectively perfect, / Inextricably the direction of historic and contemporary particulars" (10). By quoting the definition of "An objective" as it appears in his poem and presenting it as the impetus behind his 1931 "Program", the notable achievement of Zukofsky's prefatory remarks is to uphold the diversity of his role as a "critic-poet-analyst" (14). The argument that is thus assembled in "Recencies" represents an important antecedent in American avant-garde poetry in so far as it asserts the interrelationship between poetry, criticism and theoretical discourse. While Zukofsky hurriedly points out that his principles for poetry bear no relation to the philosophical acceptation of the term "objectivist" (9), poetic craft is said nevertheless to allow for a form of generic hybridity that entertains a dialogue between critical and imaginative discourse. It follows that the overlapping of prose and poetry in a formal sense is consistent with Zukofsky's objectivist model. Referring to the example of "prose criticism", Zukofsky writes: "The direction of this prose, tho' it will be definition, will also be poetry, arising from the same source or what to a third reader might seem the same source as the poetry—a poetically charged mentality" (10).

In agreement with a vision of poetry accommodating different modes of discourse, Zukosky's anthology includes a plea to widen the scope of materials used by the poet. Initially, in the 1931 "Program", Zukofsky singles out the work of Charles Reznikoff for its attentiveness to metapoetic materials and its scrupulous rendering of social realities. Furthermore, Zukofsky presents Reznikoff as a pivotal figure, whose verse most aptly demonstrates the ideals defined as "sincerity" and "objectification".[4] According to Zukofsky, it is the poet's responsibility to embody these ideals and to learn as such to voice his knowledge of the world through his craft. In the socio-political particulars of Reznikoff's subjects and the hybridity of his verse, Zukofsky identifies an ethical dimension that measures up to the ideals of the objectivist model. With

[4] See "Sincerity and Objectification: With Special Reference to the Work of Charles Reznikof", *Poetry* vol. 37, n° 5, 1931, 272-285.

Reznikoff, Zukofsky sees poetry played out as an act of cognition that encapsulates an ideal of documentation and of witnessing. Therefore it is noteworthy that the majority of the 1931 section on Reznikoff is edited out of the 1932 appendix. However, the comment that Zukofsky chose to retain in 1932 is that which underlines the ties between Reznikoff's work and other writers' experiments with documentary sources:

> It is more important for the communal good that individual authors should spend their time recording and objectifying good writing wherever it is found (note the use of quotations in Marianne Moore from Government guide-books, Pound's translations and quotations in the *Cantos*, Carlos Williams' passages out of Spanish and early American sources in *In the American Grain*; cf. Reznikoff's *The English in Virginia* in *Pagany IV* 1930) than that a plenum of authors should found their fame on all sorts of personal vagueness—often called "sophistication." (205).

If we were to identify the achievement of Zukofsky's activity as a critic and an anthologist, his description of a network of influence built upon an ideal of documentation appears particularly relevant when considering the poetry of the 1930s. Today, the poets of Zukofsky's anthology are viewed interestingly as part of a still larger confluence of poets, who acknowledge affinities with the ethical and aesthetic aims outlined in Objectivist poetics. In response to the group identity established by Zukofsky, the contemporary avant-garde considers itself as part of another group, defined as a "nexus", in which the poets of 1932 exist as individual links (*Nexus* 17). In subscribing as they do to a narrative of "affiliation" as opposed to one of "filiation", the writers of the *Objectivist Nexus* view the example of the 1932 anthology from the perspective of a continuum that has been determined by choice.

Reading contemporary poetry is one means to test the strength of the connection and to measure the degree to which writing exhibiting the objectivist ideal of witnessing and of documentation has evolved to become a defining feature of American contemporary poetry. Susan Howe and Rosmarie Waldrop, for instance, can be cited as examples of poets whose writing suggests the longevity of Objectivist aims. Both poets craft a hybrid verse form that hovers on the edge of different genre and discourse. Secondly, their poetics is grounded in methods of documentary research that dramatize a form of resistance approximating to the objectivist plea for scrutiny and record.

While revisiting historical discourse, the contemporary "poet-critic-analyst", following upon the heels of Zukofsky, continues to place the collaborative work of the 1930s within the context of a conflict or a form of resistance, be it stylistic, cultural, political or religious. According to Stephen Fredman, the road to publication of the "Program" was, to some extent, a highly personal battle for Zukofsky, and more importantly, for a community of mostly Jewish writers, a way to

articulate a vision of poetry blending the cultural pluralism of Judaism and urban modernity (*Menorah* 151). For other writers of the "Objectivist Nexus", the poetics growing out of the 1930s is viewed as a powerful contrast to romantic lyricism and therefore to the canons upheld by academia in the United States. For example, Charles Altieri uses combative terms redolent of the manifesto form to argue that objectivist practices have inspired "different but parallel alternatives to the indulgent lyricism that remains the common enemy" (*Nexus* 32). Similarly, though placing the ideological motives behind objectivist poetics in a wider political context, Burton Hatlen considers them entirely relevant to the world in which he is writing: "[…] the Objectivists also committed themselves to a *poetics of resistance*: resistance against centralizing cultural hegemonies, against the financial and media oligarchies that were and are steadily consolidating their control over our lives, against the pressure of a language that lulls the reader into a comfortable or despairing acquiescence to these powers" (*Nexus* 48).

Offered up by some of today's "poet-critic-analysts" and in conjunction with the poetry of a twentieth-century "nexus", these comments intimate that the 1932 objectivist anthology has played a significant role in the imbrication of artistry and ethics in American poetry. Most importantly perhaps, they act as a reminder of the need for forums where poets may gather to share their work and spark a move from individual consciousness to a record of experience:

> The contributors did not get up one morning all over the land and say "objectivists" between tooth-brushes. Somewhere the so-called program of the number implied that a "poet" who is not conscious of Lenin's statement that it is better to have lived thru a revolution than to write about it is not worth his salt. This may seem pig-headed—but the interest of poets is after all in particulars. Poems are only acts upon particulars, outside of them. Only thru such activity do they become particulars themselves—i.e. poems. ("Recencies" 25)

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