

LOUIS ZUKOFSKY AND THE OBJECTIVIST PROJECT, 1927-1934

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation concentrates on two composite texts edited by Louis Zukofsky: the February 1931 'Objectivists' issue of the Chicago based magazine *Poetry*, and *An "Objectivists" Anthology* (1932). Zukofsky framed these texts within editorial and critical statements that advanced an ethical and revolutionary poetics in response to the crisis of the Great Depression. The poems he selected tend to be both 'referential' and 'reflexive'. I argue that these conflicting gestures were designed to stimulate the reader's awareness of how language shapes perception, thought and action. An important paradox in Objectivist writing arises from its dual emphasis on uncertainty, and on locating the epistemological and ontological foundations upon which action might be predicated with conviction. An analysis of this paradox connects the chapters of this dissertation.

My first chapter concentrates on the literary politics and discussion that led to the publication of the 'Objectivists' issue of *Poetry* and *An "Objectivists" Anthology*. It considers the political and more general coherence of these configurations. My second chapter analyses Zukofsky's emphasis on the musicality of verse and considers it as a means of defamiliarising the poem-object. My third chapter analyses poems in both texts which parody and critique T.S. Eliot's poetry, religious conversion and increasing conservatism. It explores the tension apparent between those poems which present culture as a form of costume, and those which treat culture as the essential outgrowth of a place and its people. My fourth chapter analyses Louis Zukofsky's desire to write an American epic using a 'fugal' technique of composition. My fifth identifies the differences and similarities between George Oppen's group of four poems titled 'Discrete Series', published in the January 1932 issue of *Poetry*, and the 1934 collection *Discrete Series*. I do this in order to suggest that the Objectivist aesthetic developed away from deliberate textual ambiguity/reflexivity towards greater referential clarity.

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INTRODUCTION

“It is more pleasant and more useful,”
 Said Vladimir Ilytch,
 “To live thru the experience
 Of a revolution
 Than to write about it.”¹

Louis Zukofsky clearly wanted to point out that his epic poem was composed as a means to an end and not an end in itself. He was not making art for art’s sake. Zukofsky began making the poem in question, “‘A’1-7”, before the 1929 Wall Street Crash. A version of “‘A’-7” was published in the February 1931 ‘Objectivists’ issue of the Chicago magazine *Poetry*,² an issue which he himself guest-edited, and then a complete version of the sequence was published in another of his editorial projects, *An “Objectivists” Anthology*, in 1932. The period between the inception of “‘A’1-7” and its instances of publication coincides with one of the most traumatic periods in twentieth-century American history. At the deepest point of the Depression, 1932-33, 27 per cent of the American work-force was unemployed and unprotected by any coherent, or substantial welfare system.³ Confronted by the consequences of the stock market collapse, the Republican president Herbert Hoover kept faith with the successful *laissez faire* economic policies of the 1920s. He failed to react soon enough with adequate social measures to ease the suffering of the poor and unemployed. In his second presidential address delivered in 1930 he encouraged the old American values of self-reliance among his fellow

¹ Louis Zukofsky, ed., *An “Objectivists” Anthology* (Le Beausset, Var, France: To Publishers, 1932; rpt Folcroft Library Editions, 1975), p. 143. Hereafter abbreviated to *OA*.

² Louis Zukofsky, ed., *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*, Vol. XXXVII, No. V (1931), p. 268. Hereafter referred to as *Poetry*.

³ Eric Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914-1991* (London: Abacus, 1995), pp. 92-93.

citizens and elected to sit tight and wait for the market to rectify itself:

Economic depression can not be cured by legislative action or executive pronouncement. Economic wounds must be healed by the action of the cells of the economic body— the producers and consumers.⁴

As Hoover's 'natural' recovery failed to materialise, to many observers the situation in capitalist America came to seem anything but natural. In 1930 Congressman James M. Mead declared:

Will not our grandchildren regard it as quite incomprehensible that in 1930 millions of Americans went hungry because they had produced too much food . . . the warehouses are bursting with supplies, and still the people are denied them.⁵

In Communist Russia central planning appeared to have created full employment and abolished the cycle of boom and bust. In a letter to Ezra Pound dated 25 April 1931, Louis Zukofsky characterises the potent hold that Russia had on the imagination of many young Americans:

I suppose every young man of my age wants to go to Rhoosia to escape the spiritual undertaker. But I don't know anything about farming or chemistry or — and I don't think the C.E.P. wd. see the broad proletarian basis of

⁴ Herbert C. Hoover, 'Second Annual Message, The White House, 2 December', in *The State of the Union Messages of the Presidents 1790- 1966, Vol. III, 1905-1966*, introd. Arthur M. Schlesinger, ed. Fred L. Israel (New York: Robert Hector Publishers, 1966), p. 2773.

⁵ Jordan A. Schwarz, *The Interregnum of Despair: Hoover, Congress, and the Depression* (Chicago: Univ. Illinois Press, 1970), pp. 30-31.

“A”- 6.⁶

While Zukofsky never became a member of the Communist Party for reasons that this letter may suggest, like many other left-wing writers during this period he felt morally bound to deploy his artistic skills in the attempt to define possible solutions to the crisis; and like many others he saw the apparently successful Soviet experiment as the *natural* solution to America’s problems.⁷ However, Zukofsky’s doubts about whether the ‘C.E.P. wd. see the broad proletarian basis of “A”–6’ illustrates the problem always faced by poets with strong political beliefs: is it possible for poetry to retain its value as a site where complex and contradictory ideas and feelings can be held together in difficult dialogic proximity, and at the same time to furnish The Party with unequivocal propaganda? In her memoir *Yesterday’s Road*, Josephine Herbst described this problem in a particularly apt phrase: ‘How to reconcile Rimbaud’s *la vraie vie* with the commune?’⁸

At the same time as Zukofsky embarked on what was to become his life-work, “A”, he was also proving himself to be a skilful literary activist and prescient critic. This thesis is primarily concerned with his editorial work on the Objectivist project, and with the poetry composed by the broad range of American and European writers he brought together

⁶ Louis Zukofsky, *The Correspondence of Ezra Pound: Pound/ Zukofsky: Selected Letters of Ezra Pound and Louis Zukofsky*, ed. Barry Ahearn (New York: A New Directions Book, 1987), p. 96. Hereafter Abbreviated to *P/Z*.

⁷ For a detailed study of the American reception of the ‘Soviet Experiment’ see: Peter G. Filene, *Americans and the Soviet Experience, 1917-1933* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard Univ. Press, 1967).

⁸ Josephine Herbst, ‘Yesterday’s Road’, *Literature at the Barricades: The American Writer in the 1930s*, eds. Ralph F. Bogardus and Fred Hobson (Alabama: The Univ. of Alabama Press, 1982), p. 40.

under that label and promoted with the assistance of Ezra Pound. The scale of Zukofsky's ambition for the Objectivist project may be gauged by the epigraph he selected for *An "Objectivists" Anthology*: "And that was the revolution. . . / as soon as they named it." (OA, 27) This quote from Pound's 'Canto XVI'⁹ suggests that if the desire for revolution is not identified in words, it cannot gather mass, motion and direction. Zukofsky's use of this quote implies that the contents of the anthology performs this revolutionary act of identification. In the same Canto Pound provides an eye-witness account of Lenin manipulating a revolutionary crowd: it is as if, to rework Pound's notion of the 'luminous detail',¹⁰ Lenin were the conceptual switch governing its behaviour:

There was a man there talking,
To a thousand, just a short speech, and
Then move 'em on. And he said:
Yes, these people, they are all right, they
Can do everything, everything except act;
(*Cantos*, 74)

If, as this quote suggests, the timely use of words can direct mass-action, then the poet who holds such beliefs has very great responsibilities indeed. To varying degrees, this sense of language's power fascinates and troubles the Objectivist writers with whom I am concerned. Should the poet establish himself as the intellectual and creative double of the enlightened dictator, or should the poet offer poems that encourage the reader to recognise

⁹ Ezra Pound, *The Cantos of Ezra Pound* (London: Faber and Faber, 1987), p. 75. Hereafter referred to as *Cantos*.

¹⁰ 'A few dozen facts of this nature give us intelligence of a period— a kind of intelligence not to be gathered from a great array of fact of the other sort. These facts are hard to find. They are swift and easy of transmission. They govern knowledge as the switchboard governs the electric circuit.' Ezra Pound, *The Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, ed., with introd. by T. S. Eliot (London: Faber and Faber, 1954), pp. 22-23.

uncertainties and to judge for himself? Or perhaps there may be another alternative in which the reader is compelled towards drawing certain conclusions by the evidence the poet presents?

Much of Zukofsky's editorial writing for the Objectivist project places emphasis on the importance of seeing things clearly. Like the scientist, the poet must doubt received opinion and go back to the study of material evidence. This emphasis on vision underpins Zukofsky's ethical aesthetic with the authority of scientific empiricism: present the material evidence of what is happening in the world and those readers not suffering from intellectual 'strabismus' (*Poetry*, 269) will draw inevitable conclusions. Zukofsky's definition of the poem as a kind of 'lens' (*Poetry*, 268) implies that it should bring 'the world outside' (*OA*, 15) into clearer focus in the imagination of the reader. It should perform the revolutionary act of transforming the way the reader sees the world. In his editorial essay 'Sincerity and Objectification: With Special Reference to the Work of Charles Reznikoff' (*Poetry*, 272-284), Zukofsky described his basic 'unit' of composition, which he termed 'sincerity', as 'the detail, not mirage, of seeing, of thinking with the things as they exist, and of directing them along a line of melody' (*Poetry*, 273). From these and other visual metaphors one could, with justification, infer that the contents of the anthology and *Poetry* comprised of poems that referred to the visual appearance of the material world in precisely controlled and unequivocal language.

The evidence is more complicated. Zukofsky's own contribution to *Poetry*, the sonnet sequence "'A"-7', contains writing that seems more concerned with the ear than the eye:

See! For me these jiggers, these dancing bucks:
 Bum pump a-dumb, the pump is neither bum
 Nor dumb, dumb pump uh! hum, bum pump o! shucks!
 (Whose clavicembalo? bum? bum? te-hum . . .)
 Not in the say but in the sound's—hey-hey—
 (*Poetry*, 244)

Where, in this arrangement of unruly words, is there evidence of ‘sincerity’? We are directed to ‘See!’, and yet it is not possible to identify for certain the referent that motivates the melodic energy of these lines. Are the nouns ‘jigger’ and ‘buck’ references to young men, horses, alley-ways or buckboard carts—to name but a few possibilities? Of course, this quote only reveals its fullest significance when read in the context of the sequence from which it has been taken, but it does stand as good example of the surprising nature of Zukofsky’s poetic practice. In the absence of a definite referent, the pairing of ‘jiggers’ with ‘bucks’ draws into focus the context of vigorous motion within which they both make sense. While we may not be able to imagine a visual referent in the course of these lines, it is impossible to avoid sensing and signifying the percussive effects of jiggling and bucking: Zukofsky has submerged the visual image into the sound and rhythmic motion of a verbal dance.

“‘A’-7” demonstrates the important tension in Zukofsky’s work between his desire to name the world precisely, and his desire to foreground the musical ‘sounds’ of the poem. My need to understand this apparent paradox motivated the writing of this dissertation. What could be the ethical function of such linguistic game playing? How could it be reconciled with Zukofsky’s stated desire to present the material world clearly and thus identify the need for revolution? In the course of my research I began to understand that

this frustration of the desire to see through the poem to the world was fundamental to the Objectivist aesthetic of seeing things clearly; for what kind of seeing is it that looks at words on a page and sees, not words, but a visual hallucination of the object named? Initially uncertain as to whether this was worth exploring at length, I took heart on discovering the work of Marjorie Perloff. Among her many excellent studies analysing ‘reflexive’ poetic techniques and their ethical implications, “‘Barbed-Wire Entanglements’: The ‘New American Poetry,’ 1930-1932’ was particularly confirmatory and exemplary.¹¹ It broadened the canon of writing usually considered as Objectivist in a way that validated my own interest in the dialogues I could hear going on among the thirty or so writers ‘involved’ in Zukofsky’s Objectivist project. Many fine studies of those writers usually associated with the ‘Objectivist’ label exist— writers such as George Oppen, Carl Rakosi, Lorine Niedecker, Basil Bunting, Louis Zukofsky and Charles Reznikoff. But while these studies often look back to the context of the early 1930s to establish formative influences, I felt that there was still scope for a study that explored and complicated the context in which their early work was produced and received. And in addition to the context provided by Zukofsky’s formation of an Objectivist canon there were, as William Carlos Williams suggested in his *Autobiography*,¹² other contenders for admission to its ranks who were absent. Although alluded to in Zukofsky’s literary criticism and prefatory essays, the absence of such writers as Marianne Moore, Mina Loy, Wallace Stevens, Gertrude Stein, James Joyce and e.e. cummings from the pages of the

¹¹ Marjorie Perloff, “‘Barbed-Wire Entanglements’: The ‘New American Poetry,’ 1930-1932’, in *Modernism/Modernity*, 2 (1995), 147-175.

¹² ‘I for one believe that it was Gertrude Stein, for her formal insistence on words in their literal, structural quality of being words, who had strongly influenced us.’ William Carlos Williams. *The Autobiography of William Carlos Williams* (New York: New Directions, 1967), p. 265

‘Objectivists’ issue of *Poetry* and *An “Objectivists” Anthology* needed to be, at the very least, identified. Their omission from any study threatens to isolate the Objectivists and risks implying that ‘they’ were either a self-originating movement or simply followers of Pound and Williams.

Marjorie Perloff identifies the period covered by this thesis as one of transition:

The shift that takes place at the turn of the decade is one from the modernist preoccupation with *form* in the sense of imagistic or symbolist structure, dominated by a lyric “I,” to the questioning of *representation* itself. Discourse now becomes increasingly referential, but reference does not go hand in hand with expected mimesis. . . . The taste for the “natural,” as in Pound’s insistence that ‘The natural object is always the adequate symbol’ gives way to artifice and a marked taste for abstraction and conceptualisation.¹³

This sketches out a number of helpful and contentious ideas questioned and explored in the course of this thesis. For instance, it is hard to imagine in what sense Williams’ *Kora in Hell* (1921) is dominated by a ‘lyric “I”’:¹⁴ and it can be argued that the ‘questioning of *representation* itself’ is intrinsic to modernism’s disruption of traditional techniques of representation. And yet, taking Zukofsky’s “‘A’-7” as an example of Objectivist writing, there is undoubtedly a tension between its referential operation and the techniques it uses to foreground the musical materiality of its signifiers. It is also clearly impossible to identify a psychological persona in “‘A’-7”, partly because the meaning of the poem arises

¹³ Marjorie Perloff, “‘Barbed-Wire Entanglements’: The “New American Poetry,” 1930-1932’, p. 147.

¹⁴ William Carlos Williams, *Kora in Hell: Improvisations*, in *Imaginations*, ed. with introd. by Webster Schott (New York: New Directions, 1971), pp. 6-82.

so pointedly from the self-conscious choices the reader is encouraged to make as he or she performs hermeneutic labour on the text. And finally, Zukofsky does exhibit a willingness to move towards an artificial and unidiomatic syntax in order to achieve a more pronounced musical shape in his verse.

Referring to the title of his project in a letter to Pound dated 19 November 1930, Zukofsky wrote: 'Objectivists or the equivalent minus philosophical lingo is what it shd. be, that is the poems will be such as are objects. Or Things .' (P/Z, 69) Zukofsky was not claiming that the poetry he was presenting transmitted a transcendental experience of the world as it exists, objectively, for itself; or that its writers were wholly disinterested, neutral observers. Zukofsky's subsequent correction of any misapprehension that he was using the word in any way other than to indicate a concern with the formal properties of the poem, may have been motivated by political considerations. As Eric Homberger has pointed out: 'The term "objectivist" was, on the left, a damaging confession of neutrality.'¹⁵ Zukofsky's primary interest as an editor was with presenting poets who exhibited a knowledge of the 'craft of poetry, NOT in [leading] a movement.' (OA, 24) Hence, perhaps, the reason for his return to an elaborate sonnet-form in "'A"7'. To the definition of 'sincerity' Zukofsky added the concept of 'objectification', which he defined as: 'the arrangement, into one apprehended unit, of minor units of sincerity— in other words, the resolving of words and their ideation into structure' (Poetry, 274). Zukofsky believed that poetic 'craft' involved the arrangement of words into patterns of verbal music as well as patterns of 'ideation': it was not simply a matter of saying words but also of sounding

¹⁵ Eric Homberger, 'George Oppen and the Culture of the American Left', *George Oppen: Man and Poet*, ed. with introd. by Burton Hatlen (Orono, Maine: National Poetry Foundation, Inc., Univ. of Maine at Orono, 1981), p. 190.

them—‘hey-hey’.

His own craft involved sounding down through the layers of historical and contemporary use bound into the sound of a word. It sometimes seems that Zukofsky’s composition was guided by the opportunities for invention that words provide him with rather than an idea; that in some sense the poem grew itself. Robert Duncan has described this quality in Zukofsky’s poetry as ‘the writing back of the writing’.¹⁶ Picking up on Zukofsky’s acute sensitivity to the potentials latent in his linguistic materials, Guy Davenport has written of his ‘engineer’s love of structure, of solidities, of harmony’.¹⁷ In a similar vein, Andrew Crozier has written that in Zukofsky’s work ‘form is actualised in the local and sequential relations between particular words’.¹⁸ In the first movement of Zukofsky’s poem “‘A’1-7’ there is a passage in which a theatre-usher turns into Satan, and then transforms into a tramp; Zukofsky terms this ‘ecdysis’— a technical term for the process in which a reptile sheds its skin (*OA*, 113-114). This process, in which one figure emerges from the form of another, can be interpreted as a metaphor for Zukofsky’s technique; a technique in which words slip out of the etymological, denotative and connotative skins of other words. Perhaps the finest early example of an attempt to trace this process as it takes place in the act of reading occurs in Hugh Kenner’s essay ‘Too Full

¹⁶ Robert Duncan, ‘As Testimony: Reading Zukofsky these Forty Years’, *Paideuma*, 7 (1978), p. 423.

¹⁷ Guy Davenport, ‘Zukofsky’, *The Geography of the Imagination: Forty Essays* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1981), pp. 108.

¹⁸ Andrew Crozier, ‘Carl Rakosi in the “Objectivists” Epoch’, in *Carl Rakosi: Man and Poet*, ed. with introd. by Michael Heller (Orono, Maine: National Poetry Foundation, Univ. of Maine, 1993), p. 100.

for Talk: “A”-11’.¹⁹ Of the later studies concerned with the relationship between musical shape and linguistic coherence in Zukofsky’s poetry, one of the most sensitive has been made by Bob Perelman in his excellent book *The Trouble with Genius: Reading Pound, Joyce, Stein, and Zukofsky*.²⁰ Other fine examples of how Zukofsky’s poetry may unfold its meaning under the attentive reading eye have been made by Joseph M. Conte in *Unending Design: The Forms of Postmodern Poetry*,²¹ by Alison Rieke in *The Senses of Nonsense*,²² and by Sandra Kumamoto Stanley in *Louis Zukofsky and the Transformation of a Modern American Poetics*.²³

The development of clear vision may involve distrusting vision itself, and it may involve developing a sceptical attitude towards the ‘pictures’ of the world that others present us with. During the early 1930s a massive increase in all forms of advertising took place in America as large industrial corporations sought to stimulate a demand-led recovery from the Depression. In *Radical Artifice* Marjorie Perloff argues that the tactics used in Objectivist writing to foreground the materiality of the poem form part of a strategic subversion and deconstruction of the predominantly visual texture of the

¹⁹ Hugh Kenner, ‘Too Full for Talk: “A”-11’, *Maps #5: Louis Zukofsky*, ed. John Taggart (Athens, Ohio: Lawhead Press, Inc., 1973), pp. 12-21.

²⁰ Bob Perelman, ‘The Allegory of Louis Zukofsky’, *The Trouble with Genius: Reading Pound, Joyce, Stein, and Zukofsky* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: Univ. of California Press, 1995), pp. 170-216.

²¹ Joseph M. Conte, *Unending Design: The Forms of Postmodern Poetry* (Ithaca and London: Cornell Univ. Press, 1991).

²² Alison Rieke, *The Sense of Nonsense* (Iowa City: Univ. of Iowa Press, 1992).

²³ Sandra Kumamoto Stanley, *Louis Zukofsky and the Transformation of Modern American Poetics* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: Univ. of California Press).

burgeoning consumer culture.²⁴ Rita Barnard has made an equivalent case for similar poetic techniques used by Kenneth Fearing, and has suggested that this was a reaction to fears that revolutionary desires were being bought off by promises of future consumption.²⁵ It is also possible to consider, as Ron Silliman does in *The New Sentence*, that this insistence on the materiality of the word forms part of an attempt to ‘defetishise’ the text.²⁶ In each of these readings the Objectivist emphasis on the ‘verbal existence’ (*OA*, 18) of the poem has an oppositional, and in the case of Silliman, particularly Marxist political significance.

Zukofsky divides the use of words into two categories: ‘the word as symbol for the object, and—hallucination’ (*Poetry*, 288). This attack on the ‘hallucination’ was particularly resonant at the time. Philip Rahv wrote in an essay published in the August 1932 edition of the Marxist magazine *New Masses*, ‘a literature that is a rancid hotchpotch of mystic subjective introvert speculation, arbitrary and hallucinatory, is much better suited to capitalist class purposes than one that is animated by a high degree of consciousness.’²⁷ Rahv’s target was the bourgeois ‘flight from consciousness’ performed by the writers of the ‘Revolution of the Word’ associated with *transition*, a Paris based, international

²⁴ Marjorie Perloff, *Radical Artifice: Writing Poetry in the Age of Media* (Chicago and London: The Univ. of Chicago Press, 1991).

²⁵ Rita Barnard argues that a transition from a culture of production to a culture of consumption took place in America during the Depression in: *The Great Depression and the Culture of Abundance: Kenneth Fearing, Nathanael West, and Mass Culture in the 1930s* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1995), pp. 3-38.

²⁶ Ron Silliman, *The New Sentence* (New York: Roof, 1997).

²⁷ Philip Rahv, ‘The Literary Class War’, *New Masses*, 8:2 (1932), p. 8.

magazine edited by Eugene Jolas.²⁸ Rahv states: ‘The vagaries of Jolas & Co. . . . are quite properly the end-phenomena of a dying class.’²⁹ While it is important to see Objectivist writing in the context of ‘The Revolution of the Word’, Sandra Kumamoto Stanley’s suggestion that ‘Zukofsky effected his own proletarian “revolution of the word” by highlighting the materiality of language’,³⁰ blurs the historical distinctiveness of Zukofsky’s writing at this time, a distinctiveness that Kumamoto Stanley otherwise describes so well. The difference between Jolas’ and Zukofsky’s approach to language is contained in this statement in *An “Objectivists” Anthology*: ‘The revolutionary word if it must revolve cannot escape having a reference. It is not infinite. Even the infinite is a term.’ (*OA*, 16) Language is not a medium of transcendence, but a system that allows the conception of transcendence. Zukofsky encourages the reader to resist the closure of an hallucinated epiphany and to remain, instead, attentive to the operation of the poem’s linguistic materials.³¹ As for the ‘proletarian’ aspect of Zukofsky’s “‘A”1-7’, while it may have had a ‘broad proletarian basis’, it was not the work of a writer who admired the efforts of proletarian writers, or cared to excuse their literary deficiencies and ideological simplifications: ‘As writers, most proletarians are too idle to permit themselves the necessary communication of analysis’ (*OA*, 19). Preaching the work ethic to the worker, whose limitations may well have been caused by the depredation of long and arduous

²⁸ Eugene Jolas and co-signatories, ‘Proclamation’, *transition*, 16-17 (1929, rpt New York: Kraus Reprint Corp., 1967), p. 13.

²⁹ Philip Rahv, ‘The Literary Class War’, p. 8.

³⁰ Sandra Kumamoto Stanley, *Louis Zukofsky and the Transformation of a Modern American Poetics*, p. 3.

³¹ In connection with this avoidance of closure Charles Altieri has generalised: ‘Sincerity involves refusing the temptations of closure—both closure as fixed form and closure as writing in the service of idea, doctrine, or abstract aesthetic ideal.’ Charles Altieri, ‘The Objectivist Tradition’, *Chicago Review*, 30 (1979), p. 15.

working hours, seems insensitive. To the reader of Zukofsky's difficult poetry, this little statement threatens to confirm the suspicion that Zukofsky had no other audience in mind than fellow members of the intelligentsia.

While important innovations occur in Objectivist writing, and while Zukofsky performs some ingenious political rededications of poetic technique, in general, their practices form an extension of rather than a revolutionary break from the modernist tradition. For instance, as I have already suggested, the desire to hinge the imaginative appearance of the referent on the material operation of the word had been thoroughly explored by Williams in *Kora in Hell: Improvisations*:

The trick of the dance in following now the words, *allegro*, now the contrary beat of the glossy leg: Reaching far over as if— But always she draws back and comes down upon the word flatfooted.³²

There appeared to be a discrepancy between the avant-garde rhetoric Zukofsky used to launch the Objectivist aesthetic and the poems he presented. A statement made in the October 1930 issue of *The Criterion* seemed to ring true with increasing accuracy:

We live in an age in which it is the convention to be 'unconventional' and in which revolt, so-called, has been elevated into a criterion of orthodoxy.³³

The notion of literary modernism as a series of definite arguments between different

³² William Carlos Williams, *Kora in Hell: Improvisations*, p. 55.

³³ Owen Barfield, 'Books of the Quarter', *Criterion*, X (1930), p. 156.

literary factions, and between the past and present, became increasingly problematic as I read through *Poetry* and *An "Objectivists" Anthology*. Rather than presenting poetry that confirmed Zukofsky's editorial hypothesis, their contents formed a kind of modernist review that contained surprisingly contradictory acts. Or, to use another analogy, he presented an exhibition of modernist poetics from across the generations, across the Atlantic, across religions and nationalities, across styles and tones, and from across the political divide. Some of the selected and anthologised poets must have felt surprise on discovering their book-fellows. But then my sense that they might have been surprised may have much to do with the way in which modernist literary activists, like Zukofsky, mapped out modernism as a battle ground. In *An "Objectivists" Anthology*, Basil Bunting's satire on Eliot's aesthetics of failure in *The Waste Land*, 'Attis: Or Something Missing' (*OA*, 33-35), lies within an hour's read of Eliot's beautiful, stoical poem 'Marina' (*OA*, 160-161). Carl Rakosi's poem 'A Journey Away' (*OA*, 47-52) can be read as parody of work by Eliot and Pound. And perhaps the greatest surprise of all to a contemporary reader, although it does accord with the concerns of the Objectivist aesthetic, is the presence of Pound's 'jazz' poem, normally referred to as 'The Yittisher Charleston Band' (*OA*, 44-45), in close proximity to Charles Reznikoff's 'Rashi' (*OA*, 87-91), a dramatic poem that celebrates Jewish learning. Having studied closely the contents of both magazine and anthology I was left with the feeling that if all these writers were Objectivists, then the term had become a metonym for the multifarious tendencies and contradictions of literary modernism. In the process of reading any anthology the usual boundaries that allow the significance of a particular poem to be stabilised are greatly eroded. In this instance, the possible range of readings that could be produced by examining the differences between individual poems seemed potentially endless.

However, this problem felt particularly apposite in the context of Zukofsky's emphasis on the role the reader should play in constructing the relationship between elliptically presented details. Indeed, it is possible to consider the 'Objectivists' issue of *Poetry* and *An "Objectivists" Anthology* as paradigms of the polyphonic modernist text.

Confronted by the number of potential readings that could be drawn out of these two texts it seemed sensible to stabilise this project with an analysis of the interpretive and editorial frames which Zukofsky placed around them. In my first chapter I explore the complex combination of literary ambition, sponsorship, discussion, and power-broking that brought the February 1931 'Objectivists' issue of *Poetry* and *An "Objectivists" Anthology* into existence. I consider how these negotiations shaped Zukofsky's editorial texts, and what they may disclose about the personal, political and economic pressures that informed their authoritative, authorising operations. A clear difference in editorial technique exists between these two Objectivist texts. While Zukofsky's poetic programme remains relatively coherent and controlled in his issue of *Poetry*, the prefatory essay included in *An "Objectivists" Anthology* breaks down into a collage of references, assertions and local arguments that provide an expansive and contradictory reading context for the anthology's contents: stylistically, it is closer to William Carlos Williams' experimental prose than Ezra Pound's criticism. I argue that this destabilisation of editorial authority, coupled with other editorial choices evident in the organisation of the anthology, signals it to be a piece of Objectivist editing. In other words, Zukofsky's editing participates in Objectivist poetry's general concern with epistemological uncertainty, and with its tendency to destabilise authorial control and 'ownership' of the poetic text.

In my second chapter I present evidence for the main contention set out in this introduction: that Objectivist writing refuses to be easy on the eye looking to by-pass the word. Through a series of close readings I explore the techniques Zukofsky and others use to re-materialise the word. One important method identified involves the disruption of the syntactic unit by various means in order to destabilise and defer closure. Peter Quartermain has given poetry that uses these techniques the generic title ‘disjunctive’.³⁴ Another involves the use of deictic, or pointing words, such as ‘this’ and ‘these’, without specifying clearly the object pointed at: as a consequence these linguistic pointers end up pointing back to the words of the poem. However, I make clear that this is not simply a matter of word-playing as there is a deep concern in Objectivist writing with the difficulty of representing, or rather, notating the process of perception. I suggest that in some instances, poems that appear idiomatically strange and ‘opaque’ are, in fact, attempts to achieve a more accurate form of realism. As a result of this analysis I suggest an alternative genealogy to the Objectivist aesthetic that questions and complicates the Poundian paternity that Zukofsky’s editorship, on the whole, insists upon.

In my third chapter I read against the cohering influences of Zukofsky’s editorial work and search out the tensions in the ‘Objectivists’ issue of *Poetry*, and *An “Objectivists” Anthology*. As I have already suggested, these tensions are many in number. I concentrate on a number of different themes. Firstly, I explore how different writers reacted to anxieties about the loss of a transcendent, authorising presence. Certain writers assert an essential connection between literature and tradition, and race and nationalism,

³⁴ Peter Quartermain, *Disjunctive Poetics: From Gertrude Stein and Louis Zukofsky to Susan Howe* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1992).

while others enjoy and endure the freedom created by the belief that artistic traditions can be appropriated and worn effectively by anyone with the necessary skills. These issues are connected with meditations on the themes of the quest, the epic, and nostalgia that occur in both Objectivist texts. Finally, I analyse the parodic techniques used by writers like Carl Rakosi, and relate these subversive practices to the sense of inanity and intellectual ‘castration’ apparent in the work of other co-contributors.

The most convincing and extended attempt to build out of the ruins of epistemological uncertainty takes place in Zukofsky’s poem “A”1-7’. In my fourth chapter I provide a close reading of the first published version of this portion of “A”. I allow myself this freedom in order to demonstrate, among other things, the constant shifts Zukofsky makes between exploring the lexical and musical properties of his materials, and his attempts to construct a particularly Marxist reading of contemporary American society. From the evidence of my reading I suggest that these two apparently opposed concerns are integrated in Zukofsky’s poem. This leads me into my fifth and final chapter in which I move outside the boundaries of the ‘Objectivists’ issue of *Poetry* and *An “Objectivists” Anthology* in order to use the development of the George Oppen’s aesthetic in the early years of the 1930s to describe the general development of the Objectivist aesthetic. In January 1932, Oppen had four poems published in *Poetry* under the title ‘Discrete Series’.³⁵ Of this sequence only one poem made it into the 1934 collection *Discrete Series*.³⁶ I demonstrate that the poems from the 1932 sequence that Oppen discarded are typical of

³⁵ George Oppen, ‘Discrete Series’, *Poetry*, XXXIX (1932), 198-199.

³⁶ George Oppen, *Discrete Series*, with a Preface by Ezra Pound (New York: The Objectivist Press, 1934).

that aspect of Objectivist writing which uses reflexive techniques in order to foreground the 'verbal existence' of the poem at the expense of a clear, referential notation. In the 1934 collection, this emphasis on the materiality of the poem is counter-balanced by a more precise, nominalistic, realist aesthetic.

As this thesis is predominantly concerned with the analysis of an aesthetic programme and poetic practices, and as part of the ethical function of the poetry it studies is to encourage an attentive reading process, I have elected to develop my argument through the close-reading of poems and the supplementation of relevant contextual material. Lacking a formal training in philosophy, I felt unable to provide a thorough philosophical reading of the Objectivist aesthetic. I have no doubt that my approach could be traced back to a confusion of literary theoretical positions, but again, due to my lack of a thorough critical understanding of the philosophical and ideological bases upon which various theoretical 'schools' have been constructed, I felt unable and unwilling to commit myself to any particular theoretical approach. Personal inclination also played a part in this decision. I enjoy the work of critics who show me in detail how the words of a poem have worked for them; I consider it an act of generosity in which the evidence of the poem becomes a point of intellectual communion and discussion.

CHAPTER 1

MAKING IT NEW, AGAIN

These names which groups of writers and artists give themselves are the delight of professors and historians of literature, but should not be taken very seriously; their chief value is temporary and political - that, simply, of helping to make authors known to a contemporary public. . .

T.S. Eliot, *After Strange Gods: A Primer of Modern Heresy*, 1934 ¹

*

The main figures involved in the production of the February 1931 'Objectivists' issue of *Poetry* were Ezra Pound and the American-Jewish poet Louis Zukofsky. Their correspondence began when Zukofsky submitted 'Poem Beginning "The"' to *The Exile*, which Pound accepted for publication in the Spring 1928 issue. Zukofsky was twenty-five at the time and living in New York, where he had been born and brought up the son of poor immigrants. While speaking Yiddish at home and having access to a rich literary tradition in his mother-tongue, by eleven he was 'writing poetry in English', but not yet in "American English".² 'Poem Beginning "The"' expresses Zukofsky's determination to appropriate the dominant American language and literary culture:

259 And it shall go hard with them,
260 For I'll better the instruction,
261 Having learned, so to speak, in their
colleges.³

Zukofsky utters the archetypal oath of the cultural outsider. If motive were needed for his

¹ T.S. Eliot, *After Strange Gods: A Primer of Modern Heresy: The Page-Barbour Lectures at the University of Virginia 1933* (London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1934), p. 25.

² Louis Zukofsky, *Autobiography* (New York: Grossman Publishers, 1970), p. 33.

³ Louis Zukofsky, 'Poem Beginning "The"', *The Exile*, 3 (1928), ed. Ezra Pound (USA: Johnson Reprint Corporation, 1967), p. 23.

authoritative and energetic work on the Objectivist project, one might consider this desire to surpass Anglo-Saxon America's use of its own language. As a writer, and particularly as an editor, Zukofsky earned himself the power to define rather than be defined: he could take active measures to avoid the exclusion and misrepresentation that his Yiddish-speaking poetic forebear Yehoash had suffered.⁴ The college Zukofsky had studied at was Columbia University, where he took his MA in 1923 at the age of twenty;⁵ and the man capable of providing him with opportunities to better this university instruction and further his literary career lived on the other side of the Atlantic in Rapallo, Italy.

When Ezra Pound, after the fourth issue of *The Exile*, temporarily gave up this direct attempt to revive the intellectual spirit of the American enlightenment in that 'most colossal monkey house'⁶ he believed America to have become, Zukofsky was one of the young contacts he encouraged to take up the fight. Pound also encouraged the writer Charles Henri Ford,⁷ who subsequently edited the small literary magazine *Blues: A Magazine of New Rhythms*, and who also collaborated critically and poetically with Zukofsky in 'The Symposium' at the back of the 'Objectivists' issue of *Poetry* (*Poetry*, 285-288). Zukofsky knew he was not alone in receiving Pound's encouragement and patronage. In a letter dated 12 August 1928, Pound instructed Zukofsky that if he was not

⁴ "'Yehoash" - / Were he alive to forgive / Misuse of his "jargon". / Misrepresented (also) in an Anthology of- / Of the time, / By a translation '. Louis Zukofsky, "'A"-4', *OA*, 126.

⁵ Carroll F. Terrell, 'Louis Zukofsky: An Eccentric Profile', in *Louis Zukofsky: Man and Poet*, ed. with introd. by Carroll F. Terrell (Orono, Maine: The National Poetry Foundation, Univ. of Maine at Orono, 1979), p. 49.

⁶ Ezra Pound, 'The Exile', *The Exile*, 1 (1927), p. 92.

⁷ See Pound's letter to Charles Henri Ford dated 1 February 1929, *The Letters of Ezra Pound 1907-1941*, ed. D. D. Page (London: Faber & Faber, 1951), pp. 301-302.

prepared to take up literary activism, then he should pass on the information he had been given to others who would (*P/Z*, 13). The warning was unnecessary. Zukofsky proceeded to take admirable advantage of the advice, contacts and projects that came his way. Pound encouraged him to pursue the general aims and objectives of *The Exile*. He urged him to ‘make an effort toward restarting some sort of life in N.Y.; sfar as I know there has been none in this sense since old [Alfred] Steiglitz organized (mainly foreign group) to start art’ (*P/Z*, 11).⁸ When Pound suggested that Zukofsky visit William Carlos Williams, he willingly complied and returned with one of Williams’ finest passages of writing, *The Descent of Winter*, which Pound subsequently published in the fourth and final issue of *The Exile*.⁹ Zukofsky had proved his acumen as a literary editor at the most fundamental level; and he had also made a contact that was to be of great importance both to himself and, subsequently, to Williams.¹⁰

In a letter dated 24 October 1930, Ezra Pound informed Zukofsky that he had obtained for him ‘the wheel’ of the Chicago based literary magazine *Poetry*, ‘for the Spring cruise’ (*P/Z*, 45). This gave Zukofsky the opportunity to define the salient characteristics of his generation with the benefit of Pound’s advice. According to Pound, Zukofsky’s duty as guest-editor at *Poetry* was to ‘get out something as good as Des Imagistes by any bloody means at yr. [Zukofsky’s] disposal’ (*P/Z*, 46). He added, ‘The number ought to be NEW

⁸ For a study of Alfred Stieglitz and his ‘(mainly foreign group)’ see: Bram Dijkstra, *Cubism, Stieglitz, and the Early Poetry of William Carlos Williams* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton Univ. Press, 1969).

⁹ William Carlos Williams, ‘The Descent of Winter’, *The Exile*, 4 (1928), 30-69.

¹⁰ Apart from the mutual encouragement, Zukofsky played an important role in helping Carlos Williams to shape his 1944 collection *The Wedge*. For a study of this collaboration see: Neil Baldwin, ‘Zukofsky, Williams, and *The Wedge*’, in *Louis Zukofsky: Man and Poet*, pp. 129-142.

line up.’ (25 October 1930, *P/Z*, 51) The year 1931 marked the high-point of Zukofsky’s profile as critic, editor and general literary provocateur. His illuminating essay titled ‘American Poetry 1920-1930’ was published in the January 1931 issue of *The Symposium*.¹¹ This was followed by his guest editorship at *Poetry*. He then published the first extended essay on Pound’s *XXX Cantos* in the April 1931 issue of *The Criterion*,¹² providing further proof of his practical insight as a critic and of his commitment to the promotion of Pound’s work. An “*Objectivists*” *Anthology* was ready for publication in 1931, but due to the absence of a publisher, its appearance was delayed until early in 1932 when ‘To, Publishers’, financed by George and Mary Oppen, agreed to take it on. This delay was unfortunate as the anthology was, in part, shaped by Zukofsky’s desire to answer the critics of his work at *Poetry*, and intended to continue the public debate that Pound had encouraged him to provoke. With reference to his editorship at *Poetry*, Pound had advised:

i.e; state anything you like, but dont stop to argue
 IF anyone attacks your STATEMENT it will implicate you into a reply
 in later issues; which is all to the good.
 (Letter dated 25 October 1931, *P/Z*, 49)

Such was the degree of Zukofsky’s output that Yvor Winters commented with annoyance in *Hound and Horn*, ‘Mr. Zukofsky has filled more space in the four or five leading British and American literary journals than almost any other writer of his generation.’¹³ However, not every door that Zukofsky knocked on opened immediately.

¹¹ Louis Zukofsky, ‘American Poetry 1920-1930’, *The Symposium*, 2 (1931), 60-84.

¹² Louis Zukofsky, ‘The Cantos of Ezra Pound’, *The Criterion*, X (1931), 424-440.

¹³ Yvor Winters, ‘Poetry Chronicle’, *Hound and Horn*, VI (1932), p. 160.

Marianne Moore, then editor of *The Dial*, rejected work by Zukofsky in 1928 (*P/Z*, 6). In a letter to her brother John Warner Moore, dated 29 July of the same year, she referred to Zukofsky as ‘a kind of bohemian tick’.¹⁴ And on 29 July 1932, in response to Pound’s commendations on Zukofsky’s behalf, Moore wrote to her brother: ‘I see no reason why I should see Zukofsky, but there is no reason why I should not’.¹⁵ Such indifference suggests she did not consider Zukofsky an obvious candidate for publication; and yet his irritating persistence paid dividends. On the 18 January 1933, Moore wrote to Pound: ‘Louis Zukofsky does not write very well in prose and his verse is fluttered; but he has a heart for the thing and in a measure profits by the experience of others, so I think it right for him to sign.’¹⁶

Pound had not been wholly disinterested in securing Zukofsky the opportunity to guest-edit *Poetry*. In the flurry of advice that followed, he suggested Zukofsky perform an act of poetic redefinition that would lay to rest the faded ghost of Imagism still trapped in the pages of *Poetry* and other small literary magazines. He wanted the current poetic ‘State of things to be disinfected. . . dilutions of me. . . plus the mess caused by reactions against these dilutes. I mean the Tennysonian sonnet etc. now being done’ (28 October 1930, *P/Z*, 57). In the same letter, Pound went on to make a distinction between the achievements of the original Imagists when they first emerged, and their diluters ‘the Amygists’ (*P/Z*, 58). Despite her death in 1925, the poet Amy Lowell, from whose name

¹⁴ Marianne Moore, *The Selected Letters of Marianne Moore*, general ed. Bonnie Costello, associate eds. Celeste Goodridge and Cristanne Miller (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), p. 242.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 277.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 290.

Pound derived the derisive title he gave the imagistic ‘dilutes’, still exerted a powerful influence. In a brief history of Imagism, J.V. Cunningham wrote in 1932:

Then Amy Lowell appeared and put the movement on a business basis. She imported some good talent, D. H. Lawrence, and Pound and Williams withdrew. Rumour maliciously relates that Miss Lowell once said, “I made myself a poet, but the lord made me a business man.” And the Devil made her a literary politician. Abandoning their early principles, except for H.D., and ballyhooed by Miss Lowell, the imagists became famous and helped make formlessness fashionable.¹⁷

Whether or not Cunningham, Pound and ‘rumour’ were justified in their criticism of Amy Lowell is open to debate. However, the way in which she developed her pictorial style of writing as she proceeded to popularise Imagism certainly diverged from the style of writing that Pound had identified and formulated back in 1913.¹⁸

Lowell’s diction has a relaxed, conversational quality quite distinct from the muscular, assonantal music of early Imagist poems. Compare the opening lines of H.D.’s early Imagist poem ‘Sea Rose’¹⁹—‘Rose, harsh rose/ marred with stint of petals’—alongside this extract from Amy Lowell’s ‘Summer Night Piece’ (1925):

The garden is steeped in moonlight,
Full to its high edges with brimming silver,
And the fish-ponds brim and darken

¹⁷ J.V. Cunningham, ‘Poetry Chronicle: Envoi’, *Hound and Horn*, VI (1932), 127-128.

¹⁸ Ezra Pound, ‘A Few Don’ts by an Imagiste’, *Poetry*, I (1913, rpt New York: AMS Reprint Company, 1966), 200-206.

¹⁹ H.D., ‘Sea Rose’, *H.D.: Collected Poems 1912-1944*, ed. Louis L. Martz (New York: New Directions, 1983), p. 5.

And run in little serpent lights soon extinguished.²⁰

How does Lowell's poem diverge from the original values of 'Imagisme'? One might begin by picking out the elaborate metaphor established by the use of the words 'steeped' and 'brimming', words that transform the garden into a container of liquid moon-light. Is not this a case of a poet failing to realise that 'the natural object is always the *adequate* symbol'?²¹ As the metaphor effects its transformation, so the world viewed by the speaker of the poem becomes an obvious symbol for the speaker's feelings of repose, self-completion, and emotional equanimity. This moment is then put under threat: Lowell undercuts it by paralleling the metaphor that describes the garden as a bright container with containers of dark water, whose surfaces are illuminated by 'little serpent lights soon extinguished'. This extinction of light haunts and intensifies the moment of illuminated peace with the threat of its disappearance; as if the paradisaical imagination of the poem cannot exist without accompanying thoughts of a fall from grace. Each object referred to in this extract from Lowell's poem is arranged so as to enclose it within a specific emotional value suitable to the poem's elegiac tone. Her use of the object to signify specific emotions is not necessarily the point of divergence, for Pound defined the image as 'that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time';²² it is rather the manner in which she attempts to determine the specific meaning of the objects to which she refers. Her poem employs an explicit 'symbolism', which, it could be argued,

²⁰ Amy Lowell, 'Summer Night Piece' (1925), *The Norton Anthology of American Verse: Fourth Edition*, vol. 2 (New York, London: W. W. Norton & Company), p. 1083.

²¹ Ezra Pound, 'A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste', p. 201.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 200.

diminishes the potential meaning of the referent to the point where it simply becomes the sign for a particular sentiment. She deprives the reader of that moment, specific to an Imagist poem, when the reader fits the parts of the image together and creates afresh a moment of personal conceptual illumination. At the expense of her conversational music, she might also have enhanced the verbal activity of the opening line, and cut some words that do not ‘contribute to the presentation’,²³ by simply writing ‘moonlight steep the garden’. While there are moments of musical mimesis in Lowell’s poem, as in the fleet syllables of ‘little serpent light’, in general, her verse line lacks the assonantal tension of H.D.’s ‘Sea Rose’.

In his statement on ‘Rhythm and Rhyme’²⁴ which accompanied the 1913 definition of the image, Pound wrote: ‘behave as a musician, a good musician, when dealing with that phase of your art which has exact parallels in music.’²⁵ His advice to ‘compose in the sequence of the musical phrase’ encourages the would-be Imagist to consider the way in which each word participates in the overall musical shape of the line, and how the sound of each line participates in the greater musical structure of the poem. However, while Pound called for a thorough study and revision of techniques of versification, the mix of techniques that resulted did threaten the traditional means by which the musical qualities of a poem signified. In general, this had involved timely divergences from the metrical norm established by a poem. Shakespeare’s disruptions of the iambic pentameter line in moments of high-drama provide some of the finest examples of this technique in the

²³ F.S. Flint, ‘Imagisme’, *Poetry*, I (1913, rpt New York: AMS Reprint Company, 1966), p. 199.

²⁴ Ezra Pound, ‘A Few Don’ts by an Imagiste’, 202-206.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 204.

English language. Pound's technique raises a difficult question: if the writer is free to create new musical combinations from which a sense of ground-rhythm is missing, how can the reader experience the shock of stumbling over an inverted verse-foot, or experience a feeling of the absence and incompleteness at the end of a shortened line? For a number of reasons it would be foolish to set up a simple distinction between poetry that obeys a traditional 'language' of verse metrics, and a system of composition that searches for the sound combination capable of unlocking specific emotions: both systems are clearly capable of arousing emotions; Pound's musical analogy depends upon the subversion and exploitation of extant metrical techniques; and most poets, either side of the 'formalist'/'free-verse' divide, avoid consciously thinking in terms of metrics. Rather than taking sides, I simply want to suggest that the critical analysis of verse-music had, since Pound's statement, become more problematic. In his essay "“Recencies” in Poetry", Zukofsky identified the difficulties faced by the poetry critic prepared to read the poem as a musical score:

The components of the poetic object continued : the sound and pitch emphasis of a word are never apart from its meaning.

In this sense each poem has its own laws, since no criticism can take care of all the differences which each new composition in words is.

(OA, 20)

Zukofsky's statement is open enough for us to infer that, for the sensitive critic, this notion that 'each poem has its own laws' is always the case no matter what prosodic technique the poet has used. However, in the specific context of Zukofsky's own compositions and the contents of the anthology, the notion that a poem possesses its own 'laws' of composition does suggest that Zukofsky's criticism accounts for poetry produced according to Pound's

musical analogy. It also indicates two other important points: that critical consensus on the way in which poetry signifies was, at least for Zukofsky, becoming difficult to maintain; and that Zukofsky identifies the musical quality of the poetic text as that which places it beyond the grasp of critical discourse. Music plays an important part in the defamiliarisation, or 'othering' of the poem-object.

According to Pound it was not simply the neglect of craft that was hampering poetry at this time, but the timidity of the avant-garde. Certain poets refused to develop away from marketable aesthetic formulas. In a letter dated 24 October 1930, Pound reminded Zukofsky of his antipathy to these retrospective poets: 'I think I wrote you that I refused to contribute to Aldington's Imagist mortology 1930 <(or 1929 whenever it appeared) . . . "20 ans apres">' (24 October 1930, *P/Z*, 45). The age demanded new aesthetic forms, and Zukofsky had been granted an opportunity to chart a living process. Pound wanted a description of the 'progress made since 1912. . . I shdn't be in any hurry. Take your time and you can produce something that will DATE and will stand against Des Imagistes.' (*P/Z*, p. 45) 'Imagisme' had been a set of artistic principles that had engaged intensely with specific literary historical conditions, conditions which had now altered: 'Prob(lem). ain't now the same.' (25 October, 1930, *P/Z*, 50) While urging Zukofsky to define a new and applicable poetics, Pound seems to have wanted to keep the specificity of his 1913 conception of the 'Image' precise. Even if he himself had long ago moved on, the Imagistic method was a basic writing technique worth preserving in the integrity of its original formulation: it is possible Pound also wanted to keep the historical record of his achievement clear. On reading René Taupin's essay 'Three Poems by André Salmon' (*Poetry*, 289-293), which Zukofsky had translated and included in *Poetry*, Pound wrote to

Zukofsky and advised him to: ‘weed out “imagistic” from metaphorical on p. 291’ (12 February 1931, *P/Z*, 93). In the same essay Taupin had written, ‘Would the image no longer do? The *real* would’ (*Poetry*, 290). He associated the image with ‘abstract or decomposed detail, like [that of] the impressionists’, and contrasted it to “Nominalistic poetry”, which was ‘a synthesis of real details’ (*Poetry*, 290). Was Taupin unaware that Imagist practice involved the ‘Direct treatment of the “thing,” whether subjective or objective’?²⁶ Pound clearly felt that Taupin, who earned his living as a professor of French, was reinventing the wheel: ‘the frogs are too damn conceited to recognize and to [sic] provincial ever to KNOW when someone did it first no use your contributing to error’ (*P/Z*, 94).

Yet there are distinct differences between Taupin’s “Nominalistic” poetry and Pound’s ‘Imagisme’ that hinge on the notions of metaphor, synthesis, and the transformation of the object into a symbol for emotions and psychological states. It is important to rehearse these distinctions as they may help define the specificity of the Objectivist poetic. Zukofsky clearly identified with Taupin’s aesthetic as he mentioned in a letter to Pound dated 6 November 1930; ‘Taupin’s Salmon will serve purpose of a book-review and a bolstering of nominalisme which is probably my attitude if I know what it is—’ (*P/Z*, 68). To establish some of these differences I want to compare Taupin’s analysis of the poetry of André Salmon with my contribution to the weight of words that burdens Ezra Pound’s delicate Imagist poem ‘In a Station of the Metro’:

²⁶ F.S. Flint, ‘Imagisme’, p. 199.

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
 Petals on a wet black bough.²⁷

The two visual details directly presented are kept discrete by the line break and the semicolon. We have two pieces of syntactically unrelated information, and yet their spatial proximity implies the missing comparative 'like'. We flicker between one static image and the other, and make the points of visual and material contact between them which produces the poem's emotionally charged moment of concept-formation; 'that sudden sense of liberation' that Pound attributed to the 'Image'.²⁸ Perhaps the 'apparition of these faces' glows with the ghostly light that cherry blossom has 'on a wet black bough'; perhaps they seem as ephemeral as blossom to the observer. These readings constitute two possible syntheses of the two sides of this visual syllogism; but as the synthesis of these parts is implied and not stated, the visual details cannot finally be subordinated to these readings. However, this poem was surely designed to produce readings within the particular range I have described. Despite their separate presentation, the visual images are tied into a specific 'symbolic' operation: their proximity transports us towards the physical exploration of a particular quality and emotion.

Taupin did not perceive the same kind of psychological synthesis at work in Salmon's writing. Salmon's post-symbolist compositions were 'a matter of neat and simple notation' (*Poetry*, 290). Zukofsky perceived a similar 'accuracy of detail' (*Poetry*, 280) in Charles Reznikoff's poetry, and stated: 'He denied himself *symboliste* semi-

²⁷ Ezra Pound, *Selected Poems: 1908-1959* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990), p. 53.

²⁸ Ezra Pound, 'A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste', p. 200.

allegorical gleam, and anticipated a conviction that surrealism in 1928 was not essentially novel, and that for him at least, ten years earlier, it was not worth doing.’ (*Poetry*, 273)

Whether or not Reznikoff really denies himself that ‘*symboliste* semi-allegorical gleam’ we shall see; here it is important to note that Zukofsky was prepared to equate the symbol as an allegorical trope, perhaps akin to the emblem. Through this equation Zukofsky suggests that the symbol, like the emblem, derives its meaning from the way it is made to signify by the text, and not through the way in which it somehow catches in its surface a reflection of our psychological state, or the gleam of some transcendental, universal being latent within us.

In Taupin’s essay, André Salmon’s ‘neat and simple notation’ is extrapolated into an aesthetics of pure, disconnected information: ‘it is only when news inclines to be “literary” that it loses its force of perfect notation. Information is then more beautiful over the ticker’ (*Poetry*, 291). Where Pound’s Imagist couplet implies a relationship between real details, Taupin offers a conception of notation that leaves the event ‘to its integrality, to its maximum of the wonderful: the result will be the perfect poem . . . running on before us like the magic of the ticker. The fact *as it forms*, that is not as it is cooked by the imperfect or predatory or sentimental poet’ (*Poetry*, 292). The ‘synthesis of real detail’ produced by Salmon’s writing does not connote a quality or specific emotion, although it may also produce these, but seeks to achieve a more general awe, or wonder, at the otherness of existences denoted by its information. Taupin defined Salmon’s work as ‘the aesthetic of the reporter and the cinematographer’ (*Poetry*, 293). The purity that Taupin speaks of therefore derives both from the notion of the poet as a mechanistic medium for information about the world, and as a dispassionate observer. But coupled with this notion

of objectivity is an awareness of the need to explore the material qualities of the linguistic mechanism; to take a scientific look at, ‘the beauty of etiquette, of pure signs, pure formulas, pure gestures (actions)’ (*Poetry*, 291). This modernist emphasis on the materiality of the medium has important implications for the way in which simple notation may be written and consumed.

*

Although he did not contribute directly to *Poetry*, preferring to give up the space Zukofsky had offered him to new writing (*Poetry*, 295), Pound had associated himself with Zukofsky rather than Aldington’s Imagist reunion. Zukofsky responded: ‘Yr. refusal to contribute to 1930 Imagists duly recorded forever and ever. I appreciate it.’ (6 November 1930, *P/Z*, 64) But against what had Pound, and by extension, Zukofsky, opposed themselves with such a sense of historical importance? The *Imagist Anthology 1930* was anodyne in its ambitions. It opened with the following ‘Note’ by Ford Madox Ford: ‘this volume is not intended as an attempt to revive Imagism as an avant-garde movement’.²⁹ Indeed, Ford’s essay ‘Those were the Days’ provides a witty and debunking overview of literary modernism’s love of the ‘-ism’:

It was a little difficult to disentangle Futurism from Cubism and Vorticism and Imagism. . . and indeed, even from Impressionism and Post Impressionism and Dadaism and Hyper-realism. At least it isn’t now. But in those days it was bewildering. You have to remember that by 1913 Futurism was really a world movement. People made noises like guns and

²⁹ *Imagist Anthology 1930*, with forewords by Ford Madox Ford and Glenn Hughes (London: Chatto & Windus, 1930), p. vii. Hereafter abbreviated to *Imagist 1930*.

steam drills and sand-paper machines all the way from Otranto, by way of Paris-Berlin-London to—but timidly there—the purviews of West Eighth Street, between Fifth and Sixth Avenues.

(Imagist 1930, ix)

He continued:

Marinetti saw that the note of his day was noise, and that the note of the future was to be still always more and more noises, so that—in default of any system of aesthetics—he just stood on platforms and really evolved the most extraordinary rows.

(Imagist 1930, x)

Whereas the noise of Marinetti and the other formulators of ‘-isms’ had faded, the set of poetic practices associated with Imagism had proved perdurable. Ford described the characteristics of these practices in the following ways: as a diction at once more ‘colloquial and more exact’ (*Imagist 1930, xiii*); as the ‘beauties and actualities of ideas. . . rendered rather than stated’; and as a ‘fine command of cadences’ (*Imagist 1930, xiv*). This is not a dilution, but a restatement of the core values recorded in F.S. Flint’s 1913 note on ‘Imagisme’. Ford could only be accused of repetition, which no doubt would have been Pound’s accusation. Towards the end of the essay he writes: ‘Literature itself is produced by quiet people in garrets whilst and after the rumpus continues.’ (*Imagist 1930, xiv*) So while Pound was encouraging the ambitious Zukofsky to stake out the territory of the latest ‘-ism’, the opposition, so to speak, was arguing that the time of the movement was now over.

Were these latter-day Imagists really the enemy, especially when James Joyce was

represented among them by an extract from, ‘Tales told of Shem and Shaun: Three Fragments from Work in Progress’ (*Imagist 1930*, 121-122)? Ford’s essay suggests that by this time the avant-garde had, after nearly twenty years of fencing, so punctured bourgeois complacency that for a number of years it had been struggling to keep its target upright and convincingly present. His perception that the avant-garde was now stable enough for the literary historian to begin the process of analysis and classification only adds to the sense that its charge had come to an end. We should not necessarily accept Ford’s partial opinion, but it does point us towards the problem of literary self-definition through a dialectical argument with, and rejection of, the immediate past.

In response to Pound’s demands for innovation, Zukofsky made this confident and significant reply concerning his relation to the modernist tradition:

Think I’ll have as good a “movement” as that of the premiers imagistes—point is Wm. C. W. of today is not what he was in 1913, neither are you if you’re willing to contribute—if I’m going to show what’s going on today, you’ll have to. The older generation is not the older generation if it’s alive & up—
(6 November 1930, *P/Z*, 67)

With what one can imagine to have been a sigh of regretful pleasure, Pound responded: ‘In 1913 les jeunes did not respect their papas.’ (18 November 1930, 74) But Zukofsky’s wise opinions accord with the evidence: innovation is not the preserve of youth, especially in the arts. The other factor involved in Zukofsky’s refusal to reject his poetic father was that his own technique deliberately avoided the notion of originality. If the poem was to be composed of details, then those ‘particulars’ could include the works of other writers.

Zukofsky was not so much an original voice as the principle governing the intellectual and musical combination of verbal details.

Despite his editorial perspicuity and his forceful responses to Pound's urging, Zukofsky clearly felt tensions between his triple roles as poet, critic and polemicist. When Pound advised Zukofsky to make his name indivisible from a set of provocative values, so that 'Zukofsky' might become at once the shorthand target for disgusted and enraged reviewers and a rallying cry, Zukofsky responded:

But why "McKenzie believes in" or "Zukspewsky presents"—why not a date or a region or a tendency—Poets, 1931, or The Twelve, or U.S.A. 1931, or 606 and after. Or what do you suggest? Or Objectivists, 1931, or The Third Decade, or The States? Objectivists or the equivalent minus philosophical lingo is what it shd. be, that is the poems will be such as are objects. Or Things.
(9 November 1930, *P/Z*, 69)

Zukofsky's alternative titles, 'The Third Decade' and '606 and after', indicate that he considered himself to be part of a modernist tradition that he could not deny without denying the validity of his own poetry. The difficulty he had in finding a voice as a polemicist is suggested in a letter to Pound dated 12 December 1930, written only two months before his issue of *Poetry* was due out: 'plagiarized your phonetics—Kukchuh, & the line about the Chinky Man—"For 9 reigns there was no etc" but the rest is so sedate they won't know who the orig. owner wuz. Serves you right, anyway—I don't like writin edtrl—' (*P/Z*, 82). Zukofsky's plagiarism showed itself most obviously in this passage in *Poetry*:

Implied stricture of names generally cherished as famous, but not mentioned in this editor's *American Poetry 1920-1930* or included among the contributors to this issue, is prompted by the historical method of the Chinese sage who wrote, "Then for nine generations there was no literary production."
(Poetry, 269)

There is another example of Zukofsky borrowing from Pound that may suggest the reason why he felt the need to do so. In a letter to Pound dated 6 November 1930, Zukofsky wrote in response to one of his offers: 'Shd like to see Hemingway's They all made peace.' (*P/Z*, 64). Despite not having read the poem until this suggestion came his way, Zukofsky felt able to declare: 'Ernest Hemingway's *They All Made Peace— What Is Peace?* is as good now as it was in *The Little Review* in 1922' (*Poetry*, 270). By concealing his ignorance as to the previous existence of this poem, Zukofsky indicates to the reader of the 'Objectivists' issue of *Poetry* that he has pursued a long-standing intellectual commitment to poetry; a commitment that gives him the authority to make such bold pronouncements. While only a small detail, it may be read as symptomatic of an intellectual anxiety that will not admit gaps in its erudition; an anxiety that unfortunately tends to breed anxieties in others.

I have taken time to sketch some of the literary contexts behind the emergence of Zukofsky's issue of *Poetry*, as Zukofsky's need to negotiate his difference within the context of a clearly defined modernist tradition is matched by signs of similar needs in the work of other Objectivists. The contents of Zukofsky's issue of *Poetry* and *An "Objectivists" Anthology* are notable for the way in which they either evade being polemical, or submerge their polemical aims in the production of complex reading

experiences. Many poems have an ironic, satirical tone, while others hover perplexingly between parody and pastiche. Williams Carlos Williams, in a letter to Kay Boyle dated to around 1932, described this period as ‘a formless interim’, adding, ‘There is no workable poetic form extant among us today.’³⁰

*

Ezra Pound neither offered editorial advice on “‘Recencies” in Poetry’, the essay Zukofsky used to preface *An “Objectivists” Anthology*, nor set any expectations for its success. In a letter dated 12 October 1931 Zukofsky informed Pound: ‘The whole business goes to Putnam on Oct 19’ (*P/Z*, 99). Unfortunately, Samuel Putnam stalled and then turned the project down. It was rescued when George and Mary Oppen set up the ‘To, Publishers’ press in Le Beausset, Var, France, in the Winter of 1931. In her autobiography, *Meaning a Life*, Mary Oppen described their aims as publishers:

The plan was to print paperback books, reasonable enough in price that students and others could buy them. At that time no paperback books existed. We would pay for the cost of the enterprise, and Louis would be paid \$100 a month.³¹

George Oppen received an annuity from his parents which freed them from ‘meaningless work’,³² and allowed them to finance ‘To, Publishers’. Zukofsky had been working at the

³⁰ William Carlos Williams, *The Selected Letters of William Carlos Williams*, ed. John C. Thirlwell (New York: New Directions, 1984), p. 129.

³¹ Mary Oppen, *Meaning a Life: An Autobiography* (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow, 1978), p. 90.

³² *Ibid.*

University of Wisconsin for the academic year 1930-1931. Despite failing to be awarded a Guggenheim fellowship,³³ he bravely decided to quit and commit himself to free-lance work: ‘Doubt if even a raise wd. lure me—will send in my resignation in August. —Prospects: spending the summer in N.Y. on \$75.’(25 April 1931, *P/Z*, 97). The regular income this editorship provided, combined with intermittent payments for translation work, enabled him to keep his head above water. Unfortunately, ‘To, Publishers’ folded in August 1932, but in the six or so months that it was in operation it managed to publish: ‘*An “Objectivists” Anthology*, William Carlos Williams’ *Novelette*, and Pound’s *ABC of Reading* [in fact *How to Read*]; these paperback books were intended to be sold at low cost in the United States’.³⁴ Williams’ *Novelette* was printed in an edition of around 500,³⁵ and the ‘To, Publishers’ edition of *How to Read*, was planned to be sold at 50c.³⁶ Unfortunately, this prescient and democratic revolution in book publishing ran foul of the book market: ‘The book-sellers called the paperbacks “magazines” and would not give them shelf room.’³⁷ Pound’s *How to Read* became liable for taxation at port of entry because it was the work of a single author and therefore classified as a book and not a magazine or periodical.³⁸ A genuine attempt to disassociate the modernist text from the aura of commodity fetishism inherent in the rich bindings of the deluxe edition had failed.

³³ Letter dated 25 April 1931, *P/Z*, 95-97.

³⁴ Mary Oppen, *Meaning a Life*, p. 131.

³⁵ William Carlos Williams, *Imaginations*, p. 269.

³⁶ Letter dated 10 December 1931, *P/Z*, pp. 115-116.

³⁷ Mary Oppen, *Meaning a Life*, p. 131.

³⁸ Letter dated 10 December 1931, *P/Z*, pp. 117-118.

The prose style Zukofsky employed in “‘Recencies” in Poetry’ (*OA*, 9-25) is markedly different to that which he used in ‘Sincerity and Objectification: With Special Reference to the Work of Charles Reznikoff’. This alteration may be read as a symptom of the pressures and doubts that had damaged Zukofsky’s confidence as a combative editor; or it may be read as an indication of a radical shift in Zukofsky’s conception of the anthologist’s function as the presenter, or ‘framer’ of the works anthologised. It may, in addition to these interpretations, indicate the absence of Pound’s influence. In the first of only two contemporary reviews of *An “Objectivists” Anthology*, the critic and poet Yvor Winters wrote in *Hound and Horn*, ‘Mr Zukofsky’s preface is so badly written that it is next to impossible to disentangle more than a few intelligible remarks.’³⁹ Even the partisan Williams thought it ‘faulty’.⁴⁰ Subsequent critics have found it equally perplexing. As his lucid essay ‘American Poetry 1920-1930’ attests, Zukofsky was undoubtedly a talented critic capable of a concise prose-style; facts which make this ‘lapse’, if in deed it was a lapse, all the more surprising. Alternatively, as I have suggested, the fractured and highly elliptical prose of “‘Recencies” in Poetry’ can be read more positively as a collage of ideas that Zukofsky refused to marshal into a sustained argument, in much the same way that he deliberately refused to explain the relations between the details that made up “‘A”1-7’.

Zukofsky’s adaptation of a poetic technique to prose writing allows him to practice a process of thinking unavailable to the polemicist. Take this passage for instance:

³⁹ Yvor Winters, *Hound and Horn*, VI (1932), p. 158.

⁴⁰ William Carlos Williams, ‘Book Reviews: *An “Objectivists” Anthology*, ed. by Louis Zukofsky. (To, Publishing Co. 1932)’, *The Symposium*, IV (1933), p. 114.

A poem. A poem as object—And yet certainly it arose in the veins and capillaries, if only in the intelligence—Experienced—parenthesis—(every word can't be over defined) experienced as an object—Perfect rest—Or nature as creator, existing perfect, experience perfecting activity of existence, making it—theologically, perhaps—like the Ineffable—

A poem. Also the materials which are outside (?) the veins and capillaries—The context—The context necessarily dealing with a world outside of it—The desire for what is objectively perfect, inextricably the direction of historic and contemporary particulars—A desire to place everything—everything aptly, perfectly, belonging within, one with, a context.—

A poem. The context based on a world—Idle metaphor—a lime base—a fibre—not merely a charged vacuum tube—an aerie of personation—The desire for inclusiveness—The desire for an inclusive object.

A poem. This object in process—The poem as a job—A Classic—
(*OA*, 15)

This extract is remarkable for the way in which it risks incoherency, uncertainty and contradiction as it worries over the nature of poetry. Instead of assuming a tone of editorial authority, it demonstrates the difficulties involved in the search for an authoritative formulation. It both desires and defers the closure of definition. Zukofsky begins by reiterating his basic point that the poem should be considered a verbal 'object'. He then meditates on the origin of the hypothetical poem: 'certainly it arose in the veins and capillaries, if only in the intelligence—'. This statement makes a direct reference to a quotation from Pound made earlier in his essay:

“Words, writes Mr. Pound, do not function in this manner. They are like the roots of plants: they are organic, they interpenetrate and tangle with life, you cannot detach them as pieces of an anatomical figure. The dissection of capillaries and vein is at a certain stage no longer possible.” (*OA*, 13)

Pound's quote is open to at least two readings. Firstly, it may imply that the meaning of a word is determined by the way in which it relates to all other words: the verbal 'veins and

capillaries' of a poem cannot be dissected in order to remove what is imagined to be the key phrase or word without destroying the way in which that word or phrase derives subtle nuances of meaning from its relation to all the other words in the poem. In the end, this implies that a poem cannot be translated into criticism in this analytical manner: its significance remains a living 'other' beyond the grasp of critical discourse. Secondly, it may imply that an organic relationship exists between a word and the object or action it names. Zukofsky, as we shall see, accepts the implications of the first reading, but undermines the notion of an essential connection between word and object (which may or may not be implied in Pound's metaphor). Lacking proof as to the origin of words, Zukofsky emphasises the metaphorical nature and value of their connection with things: 'certainly it [a poem] arose in the veins and capillaries, *if only in the intelligence—*' [my italics]. Zukofsky is not prepared to assert the objective existence of a lost organic origin for each word; a lost origin that it would otherwise be the poet's duty to relocate in the moment of composition.

Zukofsky vaporises the substantial ground upon which it might be imagined the authority of his aesthetic rests: 'The context based on a world—Idle metaphor—a lime base—a fibre—'. Through this process of revision Zukofsky points out that the strict nominalist notion that words ('The context') derive their reality and meaning from the matter they name is, in fact, a metaphor produced by language. If this is plausible, then does this therefore mean that Zukofsky believes that the meaning of language results only from the way in which words relate to words, 'parenthesis (every word can't be over defined)'? Is there no encounter with a 'base' that might secure the meaning of a word and counteract the infinite recession of sense created by linguistic definition built on linguistic

definition? To adapt Zukofsky's metaphor, the 'fibre' that replaces 'the world' is simply the word *fibre*; a word which operates as a filament in the woven poetic text: unless woven into a context the word is merely sound. However, when the word 'fibre' *is* woven with other words, it provides a text capable of relating the reader to the uncertain and changing 'world outside'. Zukofsky has replaced idealism with a pragmatic approach. He accepts that language is an enclosed system of signs, and that meaning is generated through a combination of three factors: differentiation between the material appearances of signs; the way in which signs are generally used; and the ephemeral, highly specific context of their moment of use. Into this unstable linguistic 'environment' Zukofsky adds a fourth factor: a word's 'meaning' may be stabilised by reference to the area of experience it designates. 'A context' may not literally be 'based' on the world, but the language of which it is composed can perform a metaphorical action that points us towards the common *base* of ostensible experience.

The only kind of being the above quoted passage offers us, is the experience of being with words as a material phenomenon, along with an experience of their ability to relate us to the world in different ways. According to Zukofsky the poem is neither the performance of lofty personality (an 'aerie of personation'), nor the container of isolated energy ('a charged vacuum'). In other words, the poem is neither full nor empty but present in the world as a printed, material thing. However, Zukofsky does not avoid the concept of perfection. It is voiced in his desire to achieve the linguistic equivalent of a utopian community: 'everything aptly, perfectly, belonging within, one with, a context—'. The provisional way in which Zukofsky may be using the notion of perfection can be ascertained by returning to his own comments on 'objectification', which he described as

the ‘perfect rest’ that results from ‘resolving. . . words and their ideation into structure’ (*Poetry*, 274). The poet should aspire to satisfy the reader’s desire for explanatory context and his ‘musical’ tastes. But what aesthetic model should the poet work towards: the divine form of beauty and truth (which Zukofsky has clearly ruled out), or a culturally determined set of values? Zukofsky acknowledges that his own aesthetic may be derived from the latter: ‘The codifications of the rhetoric books may have something to do with an explanation of this attainment’ (*Poetry*, 274). Zukofsky’s emphasis on the way a poem should connect metaphorically with its material context, and suggestion that aesthetics are culturally determined, co-extend with an attack on the confident essentialist notion of ‘pure poetry’ (*OA*, 12) which he identifies in a critic of the T.S. Eliot school. In “‘Recencies” in *Poetry*’ Zukofsky quotes from this unnamed critic thus: ‘some of Pope, a great deal of Dryden and Landor, are pure poetry’ (*OA*, 12). For Zukofsky, such bald assertions are not enough: where the follower of Eliot perceives simply ‘taste’ in the line ‘*And bids afflicted worth retire to peace*’ (*OA*, 12), Zukofsky reads ‘(*Worth* : cultural involved with economic standing ? *afflicted* implying at least an impress if not an oppressor and obviously an oppressed ?)’ (*OA*, 13). Whether or not one agrees with Zukofsky’s reading, it is possible to admire the responsibility with which he approaches the role of critic. He considers the possibility of a connection between the rhetorical characteristics of the poem and the structure of economic relations prevalent in the historical situation in which it was composed. This method extracts the poem from its position in the timeless hierarchy of aesthetic perfection, and returns it to an historical context in which the reader may once again be able to consider the social activity it performed. Zukofsky cites Eliot as one of those responsible for limiting the interpretive contexts in which a poem might be read. He quotes Eliot: “‘I sometimes think that our own time with its elaborate equipment of science

and psychological analysis, is even less fitted than the Victorian age to appreciate poetry as poetry.” (*OA*, 11) Instead of this tendency to decontextualise, Zukofsky would have the poet ‘indicate by energetic mental behaviour how certain information may be useful to other information.’ (*OA*, 11) He then, rather amusingly, goes on to identify Eliot’s poem ‘Marina’, included in the anthology, as ‘a good example’ of this combination of different fields of discourse because it includes ‘facts about ships’. (*OA*, 11)

With this anti-essentialist project in mind, I want to suggest that the main passage quoted above from “‘Recencies” in Poetry’ could not have argued its point in a polemical manner to the same effect that it does through this process of assertion and self-revision. By avoiding the hierarchical ordering of thought that a sentence performs, and instead working out a line of thinking through the juxtaposition of fragments and phrases, Zukofsky is able to demonstrate the effect that context has on his own words. To understand its implications it is necessary to actively link it into the contexts provided by the rest of the essay. Zukofsky’s destabilisation of meaning also enables him to play out one of his major dilemmas: the tension between his desire and ethical need for conviction and action, and his no less ethical sense of epistemological uncertainty. His text accepts that all knowledge may be figured metaphorically, and yet cannot wholly relinquish the metaphor of perfection that has to depend, if it is to make sense at all, on the notion of an ideal. He has gone so far towards what we might now term a post-structuralist notion of language, but will not go further towards the moral relativism such a position might bring with it— for this would damage the authority he needs to legitimate his utopian aspirations.

What does “‘Recencies” in Poetry’ really tell us about Zukofsky’s attitude towards

editorial control and critical analysis when allowed to fly solo, as it were? It is not, as I have been trying to suggest, simply the case that Zukofsky was a better poet than he was critic, for there is ample proof to the contrary. He chose to publish his text in this form, and I believe that this was a tactical decision: it allowed him to talk about the importance of context and, at the same time, to make the reader enact a complex process of contextualisation. The uncertainty that this and other passages in ““Recencies” in Poetry” admit, amounts to a deconstruction of his own authority as editor; this becomes especially apparent when considered in the context of the rhetorical tone of certainty employed in his essay for *Poetry*. It possible to interpret this as part of the Objectivists’ general tendency to impersonalise, if not de-authorise the text, by emphasising its operations as a textual system. This tendency towards the deconstruction of authorial and editorial control is signalled by other decisions Zukofsky made. He does not advance himself as the ideal interpreter of the poetry he presents in the anthology, and, indeed, makes only a couple of passing references to the contents in ““Recencies” In Poetry”. Within the first two sections of the anthology Zukofsky absents himself as the principle of arrangement by placing the poems in alphabetical order according to their author’s names. At the end of the Anthology is a remarkable section titled ‘Collaborations’(OA, 189-200), in which Zukofsky and other poets rearranged the words of their fellow contributors. William Carlos Williams’ review of *An “Objectivists” Anthology*, provides a good description of the reasons for these collaborative interventions:

The collaborations are added to show that the personality of the writer must be suspect. If a poem is made of words then those words are not sacred. They may be arranged (provided they are capable of retaining any meaning

at all) in a somewhat new order and the sense *perhaps* clarified.⁴¹

That '*perhaps*' may be a consequence of the fact that Zukofsky 'collaborated', or perhaps one should more accurately say cut Williams' poem 'March' (*OA*, 196-200) to produce a more elliptical structure with an insistently 'verbal existence'. While traces of the ego-poetic voice remain in the 'Collaborations' section, Zukofsky generally excised those parts which either signified authorial emotion, or commented reflexively on the text's operation. For instance, from the opening section of Kenneth Rexroth's 'Prolegomena To A Theodicy' Zukofsky removed one of the few instances in which the poem declares the intention of its effects: 'No one shall ever enervate this structure' (*OA*, 53). The implication of this cut is that it is important for the reader to have an uninterrupted experience of the fluid process of the text, and to reflect on its function afterwards. Again, Zukofsky loosens the writer's control over the meaning of his own words. In the context of Zukofsky's Marxist sympathies, it is quite possible to interpret these acts of collaboration as a communisation of textual production. That a poem may have three authors opposes itself to the very notion of the poem as the organic expression of a privately inspired poet.

⁴¹ William Carlos Williams, 'Book Reviews: *An "Objectivists" Anthology*', p. 117.

CHAPTER 2

SOUNDING SENSE

. . . the air was charged with 1932, harsh and a little crude but of a welcome antiseptic. A white surgeon's table was wheeled in, the body of Aoide was dissected with the sharpest scalpels and the skeleton revealed in its clean and shining pallor. An arrangement of jerkily revolving planes was strung on the spine of a slow small melodic line, which gave the impression of infinite projection beyond the stated close.¹

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On the 25 October 1930 Pound wrote to Zukofsky: 'If you cd. define and dissociate the whatshallwesay impulses depulses etc. of yr. elders (not AT length; but in say a sentence or three paragraphs)' (*P/Z*, 53). In *An "Objectivists" Anthology*, Zukofsky performs both tasks in one sentence that pays homage to Pound while it demonstrates a subtle critique and an alternative to his method. Zukofsky dedicated *An "Objectivists" Anthology*:

To
Ezra Pound
who despite the fact
that his epic discourse
always his own choice of matter
causes him in his Cantos
to write syntactically almost no two lines
the consecutiveness of which
includes less than two phrases
"And doom goes with her in walking,
Let her go back to the ships,
back among grecian voices."
himself masterly engaging
an inference of musical self-criticism
in his Fifth Canto
(readers can afford to look for the lines)
is still for the poets of our time
the

¹ Robert Pitney, 'Music Chronicle: Yaddo and Gurre', *Hound and Horn*, V (1932), p. 665.

most important.
(*OA*, 27)

Zukofsky's dedication lights a lamp of subtle difference within the shadow of Pound's influence. The 'inference of musical self-criticism' Zukofsky detects in Pound's 'Fifth Canto' is surely contained in these lines:

The fire? always and the vision always,
Ear dull, perhaps, with the vision flitting
And fading at will.
(*Cantos*, 17)

Enraptured by vision, the poet's eye may tyrannise and 'dull' his ear—'perhaps'. Significantly, Zukofsky correlates Pound's emphasis on the control and arrangement of vision with the way in which he fits the syntactic unit into the verse-line. According to Zukofsky's reading of the *XXX Cantos*, Pound only rarely splits, or enjambes, a syntactic 'phrase' over two or more lines. The three lines from 'Canto II' exemplify this tendency. Each clause is resolved within the duration of the line it occupies; and this conceptual resolution, this moment when the thought clicks, is emphasised by the musical cadence of the line ending. This characteristic is even more apparent in this example from 'Canto IV':

Ply over ply, thin glitter of water;
Brook film bearing white petals.
The pine at Takasago
 grows with the pine of Isé!
The water whirls up the bright pale sand in the spring's mouth.
(*Cantos*, 15)

Pound's incantatory verse-line spills evanescent images and modifying non-visual concepts 'ply over ply' in the imagination: each line contains a complete proposition. In this extract from 'Canto IV', the verse proceeds by an accumulation of clear visual images and coherent stages of conception, even if the allusions made, and any principle governing their arrangement, may remain less so. The verse-line is audibly the basic unit of thought and music. In the one instance where the sentence is broken over two lines, and the subject separated from the verb and object, there is enough information in the first half of the line to present the reader with an image: 'The pine at Takasago/ grows with the pine of Isé!' The final line illustrates why Zukofsky considered Pound a masterly self-critic. It demonstrates an important musical technique Pound encouraged Zukofsky to adopt in a letter dated 6 November 1932: 'o[n]e word must also slide into next and to next and to next/ (not cradling and hypnotizing; but conducting . . . ' (*P/Z*, 137). The vowels in this line move in an audible cycle from the back of the mouth to the front, and then back, which imparts the musical trajectory and impetus to line. As energy is usually revealed by what it has to overcome, Pound interrupts this vowel flow, that might otherwise have been hypnotizing, with consonants that require an equally strong muscular enunciation. The sound-feel of this line is not onomatopoeic, it neither gurgles, babbles, nor splashes, but involves the speaker in a vocal performance of the spring's energy.

Zukofsky's concern, not provoked by the work of the self-critical Pound, appears to be that the image illuminated at the end of the line unit might deflect attention away from the quality of the concurrent musical cadence; that preoccupied by vision the poet might forget that he or she is working with the musical properties of verse. Zukofsky's counteractive measure is implied, if not demonstrated to best effect, in the relationship

between syntax and lineation in the dedication: the lines ‘who despite the fact’, and ‘the consecutiveness of which’, both require the line that follows for a resolution of sense. He separates conceptual illumination from the cadence of the line-ending and defers it until the end of the next. In other words, his dedication contains examples of pairs of lines ‘the consecutiveness of which’ contain only one clause. This denies certain lines either a resolved image or concept, leaving the eye and the ear simply with the appearance and sound of the words, and with a sensation of meaning and desire in transit. Indeed, the dedicatory strophe, as a whole, suspends the resolution of its main statement, ‘To Ezra Pound who is still for the poets of our time the most important,’ across an involuted, hypotactic, digression. Its resolution, finally allowing the reader to fit all the subordinate clauses of the sentence into their designed relationship, only occurs with the ultimate cadence of the strophe. Zukofsky had earlier written of Pound’s ‘poetic locus produced by the passage from one image to another’.² As the *XXX Cantos* accumulate a complicating dialogue of discrete and coherent units, it is possible to understand Zukofsky’s statement that Pound also works with the flow of meaning between related ‘images.’ However, Pound’s generally paratactic syntax produces a different experience of flow to that induced by the syntactic forces which bend and twist the light of meaning plied through Zukofsky’s lines. It is a symptom of the different qualities of flow exhibited by their verse that a single line may be quoted from Pound, but to quote a line from Zukofsky normally necessitates quoting the stanza.

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² Louis Zukofsky, ‘American Poetry 1920-1930’, *Symposium*, 2 (1931), p. 73.

In “‘Recencies’ In Poetry”, his introductory essay to *An “Objectivists” Anthology*, Zukofsky wrote of: ‘the image felt as duration or perhaps of the image as the existence of the shape and movement of the poetic object’ (*OA*, 18). A recollection of Pound’s definition of the image is necessary to understand Zukofsky’s particular innovation: ‘An “Image” is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time.’³ It should give ‘that sense of sudden liberation; that freedom from time limits and space limits; that sudden sense of growth, which we experience in the presence of the greatest works of art’.⁴ In my reading of ‘Canto IV’ this experience occurs at the end of each line unit. In ‘Sincerity and Objectification: With Special Reference to the Work of Charles Reznikoff’ Zukofsky defined the fundamental verse unit of *his* verse as something called ‘sincerity’:

In sincerity shapes appear concomitants of word combinations, precursors of (if there is continuance) completed sound or structure, melody or form. Writing occurs which is the detail, not mirage, of seeing, of thinking with the things as they exist, and of directing them along the line of melody. (*Poetry*, 273)

‘Shape’, ‘melody’, and ‘duration’ are Zukofsky’s key terms. The image is no longer apprehended in ‘an instant’, but throughout the duration of the musical phrase: this is a subtle yet important distinction. Emphasis is placed on the image ‘*as it forms*’, and how it forms. The ‘image’ is tied back into the semiotic processes of the language. ‘Shape’ is ‘concomitant’ with ‘word combinations’. It is not the moment of insight that preponderates, but the linear processes of reading and interpretation. There is a striking

³ Ezra Pound, ‘A Few Don’ts by an Imagiste’, p. 200.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 201-202.

similarity between Zukofsky's statement that sincerity originates in the simultaneous occurrence of musical language and images, and Emerson's notion that the spontaneous occurrence of images during speech as the 'validating certificate' of their truthfulness.⁵ In Zukofsky's aesthetic, meaning in the poem clearly occurs through the language; it is not an immanent presence within the material world that the virtuous and meditative soul may, with perfect transparency, transliterate into human speech. We are engaged with a linguistic system rather than a transcendental presence. Sincere composition is that which has been constructed through the empirical testing of language and its descriptive qualities against the appearances, or occurrences of the object, and not against the presumption of a transcendental knowledge of its essence. We, not God, are the logos, or agency that identifies the significance of existence: 'if the mind does construct its world there is always that world immanent or imminently outside which at least as a term has become an entity' (*OA*, 25). However, Zukofsky does not rule out a transcendental origin to the world, or that the world has an objective material existence. These conceptions, for Zukofsky, are imponderables; it is simply that how we name the world determines how we perceive its existence. The world's intelligibility is something we construct rather than receive in moments of transcendental inspiration or revelation. Zukofsky was reiterating a similar argument put forward by Williams in *Spring and All*: 'The value of the imagination to the writer consists in its ability to make words. Its unique power is to give created forms reality, actual existence.'⁶ Words allow the process of attention and identification to begin— if I read about mosses, then they begin to appear beneath my feet in all their

⁵ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Complete Essays of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. and introd. by Brooks Atkinson, foreword by Tremaine McDowell (New York: The Modern Library, 1950), p. 17.

⁶ William Carlos Williams, 'Spring and All', *Imaginations* (New York: New Directions, 1971), p. 120.

variety.

The opening stanza of Zukofsky's poem '—"Her Soil's Birth": (Madison)', included in the lyric section of *An "Objectivists" Anthology*, serves as a good example of Zukofsky's continuance of thought, or deferral of conceptual closure throughout the duration of an extended musical-linguistic phrase:

Virtue in that—
 If fall of pods' spring-seeds to earth,
 Sun, ferns rise at,
 Together glassed themselves in green, girth
 With the windfall of her soil's birth.
 (OA, 183)

The proposition framed in this stanza qualifies the meaning of a word: 'Virtue'. In light of his use of the term sincerity, it is clear that Zukofsky is interested in redefining key ethical terms and using them to lend authority to his aesthetic. This would seem to corroborate Zukofsky's own sense that he did not fully understand the meaning of Taupin's 'nominalistic' poetry. The OED defines nominalism as, 'The doctrine that universals or abstract concepts are names without corresponding reality'. This revival of abstract moral categories would appear to threaten the notion that his writing is concerned with establishing a provisional, materialist set of values. However, the significance of the proposition that follows is less than secure. Having accepted that his materials are primarily linguistic and not visual, Zukofsky creates a series of complex textual and musical effects. For instance, if seeds *fall* to earth, then in the past the sun and ferns have 'glassed' themselves together, drawing 'girth', a metonym for growth, from the 'windfall'

of vegetable debris which forms the life giving soil-mulch. The interdependency of the seed-*fall* of birth and the wind*fall* of death is enacted by this verbal echo. The triad of end-rhyme sounds also musically link the conceptual movement from death to rebirth, and the whole stanza feels integrated by a single melodic movement. Zukofsky enhances and foregrounds each word's semantic and musical interdependency with all the others in this stanza to form a linguistic structure that conceptually enacts the cycles that he proposes occur. Zukofsky *makes* his point possible: virtue is the experience of process this poem enables. Virtue is the use of language that brings into existence, or enacts, a conception of the unimpeded networks of energy that constitute natural life. Like Pound, Zukofsky is profoundly interested in the virtues of natural circulation.

Reading this stanza involves an extraordinary range of interpretive activities and choices. Does the dash following 'Virtue in that—' make 'that' a demonstrative pronoun, or a relative pronoun? Does this resultant ambiguity allow virtue to be both qualified by the description that follows, and asserted to exist in the natural cycle of growth? There is something unresolved and anomalous about each line in the stanza that propels the mind forward in its search for coherence. There are significant verb tense shifts that occur over the third, fourth and fifth lines. What is predicated about the phototropic life force of ferns, a life force that occurs forcefully in the present tense, is stated in the simple past tense. 'Girth', occurring emphatically at the end of the fourth line, after a late caesura, translates sense back into the present, and propels us on into the phrase with which girth is syntactically connected. The temporal location shaped by the sentence is transposed during the slight musical interruptions of the line ending and caesura, unexpectedly slipping our perspective from the past into the present and back. Zukofsky's verb tense

shifts deliberately disorientate and perplex, generating the sense that the stanza does not refer to a particular, extra-textual moment. The last line reiterates the material indivisibility of the past and present in a way that knocks the meaning of the final word into an involuted recession of sense. The ‘windfall’, now girthed in the ferns, was once born out of the same soil that it now has enriched in order to confirm the conditional proposition about seeds springing from pods. As the origin of life recedes through the indivisible cycle of life and death, so the desire for textual resolution has the ground slipped from under it just as the *rallentando* of the final line appears to be signalling that resolution, or ‘rested totality’ (*Poetry*, 274) as Zukofsky rather pompously called it, is about to come dropping slow.

*

Zukofsky sensed the apparent contradiction between his techniques of poetic objectification, and his promulgation of an adaptation of Pound’s image-based theories; between his deliberate textual ambiguities and his emphasis on ‘seeing’ and ‘details’. In “‘Recencies’ in Poetry” he wrote concerning one of his own contributions to the anthology: ‘L.Z.’s “Prop LXI” in defence of the conceit is curious—since it contradicts on the face of it all his critical values opposed to the confusion of the senses.’ (*OA*, 23) The title “Prop LXI” is a reference to Spinoza’s proposition: ‘a desire that springs from reason can never be in excess’:⁷

⁷ Spinoza, *Ethics: Preceded by On the Improvement of Understanding*, ed. with introd. by James Gutman (New York: Hafner Press, 1949), p. 233.

PROP. LXI

*(The Strength of the Emotions—Ethica ordine geometrico
demonstrata : IV)*

Confute leaf-

Point's water with slight dropped sounds,—
Turn coat, cheat facts, say for the spring's bloom's fall
The tree's trunk has set the circling horn-branch
To cipher each drop—the eye—shot in the rain around.

So cheated well

Let the fallen bloom-wet clutter down, and into . . .
And the heart (fact. .) holds nothing, desire is
No excess, the eye points each leaf
The brain desire, the rain (cheat.) recites their brief.

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(OA, 184)

What does it mean to prove 'leaf-point's water' wrong, false, or futile by listening to 'slight dropped sounds'? It would be an extreme Berkeleian indeed that would mistrust a causal link between these discrete perceptions. Surely the most reasonable reaction to such stimuli would not be to 'confute' the visual perception with the aural, but to think of a relationship between them; to say that the drops are the cause of the sound. Indeed, this is what the poem's music seems to be doing. The light, staccato sounds of its first and second lines seem to mime the 'slight dropped sounds' of falling water. The poem's word music seems to be saying that it has been caused by the recollection of an actual event. But the poem butts skeptically in on this arrangement. Any relationship between drip and sound, and between event and poem, is a 'cheating' of facts through the act of 'saying'. The notion that a tree may have deliberately arranged itself into the physical configuration the poem describes is absurd. Zukofsky's point is quite clear: such vestigial anthropomorphisms latent in language and poetry 'cheat' the world into meaningful relationships that do not exist; they present the world as if it were a ciphered text, or as if

it did have a 'brief' to recite.

In marked contrast to saying such patterns into existence, 'the eye', as opposed to the brain, is 'shot in the rain around'. I take the phrase '—the eye—shot in the rain around' to describe the perceptual experience of gazing out into an encircling, rained-through visual field made up of a chaos of randomly occurring watery events. It is a different way of describing the world that admits a sense of chaos. Fundamentally, the poem's concern is with the degree of subjective order that may be projected legitimately onto the chaotic otherness of the objective world, and with the authority from which that order may proceed. Only on the face of it is this poem about the confusion of the senses, in fact, it is an interrogation of the validity and possibility of an unconfused representation of the senses. The more one tries to name experience accurately the more language may have to diverge from a common, intelligible idiom. However, bearing in mind the reference to Spinoza, Zukofsky seems to indicate that it is valid to allow the brain's desire, coupled with a non possessive 'heart'(emotions), to configure the world into patterns so long as that desire springs from reason's close study of matter. Indeed, if a 'desire[s] that springs from reason can never be in excess', then there is no limit to the legitimate ways in which the world may be shaped in the saying as long as the poet sincerely believes that his desire springs from reason's encounter with matter.

This sounds like the most capacious of self-authorising principles. It is another good example of Zukofsky's desire to accept the lack of innate order in reality, and at the same time to repress the moral relativism that might arise out of this apprehension, by returning to the values of reason. In many ways, Zukofsky's writing straddles two

conflicting literary tendencies of the early 1930s: the linguistic ‘hygienists’—perhaps best represented by Pound and Eliot—and the writers who practised their craft with a ‘Revolution of The Word’ freedom. This second tendency is seen, perhaps at its best, in Joyce’s polysemous text, ‘Tales told of Shem and Shaun: Three Fragments from Work in Progress’ (*Imagists 1930*, 121-122), which evolved into *Finnegan’s Wake*. Zukofsky’s position in relation to both these kinds of writing is often confusing. He oscillates between the advocacy of textual precision, of poetry that presents vision, and the practice of a kind of symbolist word-playing. Indeed, Zukofsky included translations of Rimbaud in his issue of *Poetry*, and referred to himself as ‘Rimbaud/ with glasses’ in “‘A’6” (*OA*, 140). However, in what surely must be a rejoinder to Eugene Jolas’ ‘Proclamation’(1929) of ‘The Revolution in the English Language’ in *transition*,⁸ Zukofsky wrote in *An “Objectivists” Anthology*: ‘The revolutionary word if it must revolve cannot escape having a reference. It is not infinite. Even the infinite is a term.’ (*OA*, 16) Zukofsky makes two important points: a word must have a finite number of uses if it is to be distinguished from speaking in tongues, echolalia and intoned breath; and transcendence can only be spoken about because we have agreed on the specific and limited use of the term transcendence. In other words, the term transcendence cannot transcend its own finite use. Jolas’ project, set out in successive statements and editorials in *transition*, had as its goal the production of a collective myth through a Dionysian ‘descent’ into group consciousness. This journey was to be achieved, as Jolas and his co-signatories declared in their ‘Proclamation’, by breaking up the Apollonian ‘hegemony of the banal word’, or the habitual, repressive ways of saying that stabilised certain perceptions of the world. Their ultimate goal was, as they

⁸ Eugene Jolas and co-signatories, ‘Proclamation’, *transition*, 16-17 (1929, rpt New York: Kraus Reprint Corp., 1967), p. 13.

put it, an apprehension of the ‘a priori reality within ourselves alone.’ Both Zukofsky and Jolas were involved in an attack on the ideological constraints imposed by language. However, having conducted their various attacks, the foundation of their new epistemologies were based within two different areas of discourse, empirical reason and a transcendental psychology.

‘A Preface’, which Zukofsky published in the final, Autumn 1928 number of *The Exile*, reveals the extent of Zukofsky’s legislative ambitions, and perhaps the source of his need to establish an authoritative origin for such poetic and social laws:

Mr. T. S. Eliot has told us that “Poets in our civilisation, as it exists at present, must be difficult.” But they must be more than that if they are to outlive their experience—a refined sensibility for appreciating love, war, death, relativity,—and mean anything to the future. Especially if the future will find it necessary to subordinate the cries and twists of our present to the creation of a singular sociological myth as great in its way, and as binding on peoples, as the solar myths of the ancients in their times.⁹

Jolas sets forth similar ambitions for poetry in the March 1932 number of *Transition*, though ones based upon a significantly different source of authority:

Poetry builds a nexus between the ‘I’ and the ‘you’ by leading the emotions of the sunken, telluric depths upward toward the illumination of collective reality and a totalistic universe.

The synthesis of a true collectivism is made possible by a community of spirits who aim at the constructing of a new mythological reality.¹⁰

⁹ Louis Zukofsky, ‘A Preface’, *The Exile*, 4 (1928), p. 86.

¹⁰ Eugene Jolas and co-signatories, ‘Poetry Is Vertical’, *Transition: An International Workshop for Orphic Creation*, 21 (1932), 148-149.

Jolas' mythological reality is founded upon the identification of a 'nexus' of common psychic material between "you" and "I". Zukofsky's statement does not give us enough information to say for certain how his 'singular sociological myth' will evolve, but in the context of his poem 'Prop. LXI', one may imagine that it will arise from the common ground of knowledge derived from reason's verbal notation of the process of the material world. For Zukofsky, in general, this meant the teachings of Marx. This search for a total mythology built on the foundations of reason may provide an explanation of why Zukofsky, who had strong Communist sympathies, was able to share certain aesthetic practices with Pound. In a letter to Pound dated 20 March 1928, Zukofsky wrote: 'Marxian economics is instinctively bound to Spinoza's *natura naturans*' (*P/Z*, 9). Explaining his version of *natura naturans*, Spinoza writes:

all things are determined from a necessity of the divine nature, not only to exist, but to exist and act in a certain manner, and there is nothing contingent. . . by *natura naturans* we are to understand that which is in itself and is conceived through itself, or those attributes of substance which express eternal and infinite essence, that is to say . . . God in so far as He is considered as a free cause. Prop. XXIX.¹¹

Spinoza heals the dualistic rift between mind and body, and gives essence to Plato's temporal world of shadowy and corrupt things. He was commonly held to be a proto-materialist, and had the additional attraction for Zukofsky of being Jewish. Through his comparison of Spinoza to Marx, Zukofsky transforms Marx's economic and historical theories into organic natural laws. This contradicts the pragmatism I have identified

¹¹ Spinoza, *Ethics*, p. 65.

elsewhere in Zukofsky's work; a pragmatism that accepts that concepts should remain provisional and subject to revision. This absolute authorisation of Marxist thought, coupled with Zukofsky's suggestion that the individual will have to subordinate 'the cries and twists of [its] present' to its rule, certainly in retrospect, has a dangerously totalistic, if not totalitarian ring. Zukofsky's essay "Recencies" in *Poetry* closes with a strange digression that seems ill-informed for 1932, or naïve in its preparedness to accept the selective information of propaganda.

Stalin has been spending some of his time in his one or two rooms not destroying Shakespeare, but has been reading the not really predacious Englishmen on his vacation. (*OA*, 25)

Stalin is simply someone with a couple of rooms who spends his no doubt brief spare time not oppressing poets, but, like a good Objectivist, taking an interest in non-predatory writing.

*

Bunting's poem 'The Word', included in the 'Objectivists' issue of *Poetry*, shows a concern, similar to that shown by Zukofsky's poem 'Prop. LXI', with how patterns of conception shape the world, and may, in turn, be shaped by it:

Nothing
substance utters or time
stills or restrains
joins the design and the

supple measure deftly
 as thought's intricate polyphonic
 score dovetails with the tread
 sensuous things
 keep in our consciousness.
 (*Poetry*, 260)

It is not the immanent utterances of substance or essence that create design, but the dovetailing of 'thought's intricate polyphonic/ score' (which may be taken as a kenning for the musicality of language), to the 'tread', or process, of sensuous things. What once were considered the corrupt temporal modifications of substance are now the sole focus of attention. This metaphor that describes the dovetailing of thoughts to things is similar to Zukofsky's preference for a form that embodies the 'intricacy of the renewal of matter' rather than 'the theologian's geometry'; in other words, a form that follows the image as it evolves co-extensively with language in the imagination. However, no material objects-in-process are referred to in these two stanzas, unless we make the important leap and recognise that words are also 'sensuous things' in process. In these opening stanzas, language is both the intricate polyphonic score and the sensuous, musical thing; thought attends its own sensual, musical realisation. Thought occurs through language, and not through thinking purely in intended images. Bunting is aware that the way in which we think things is shaped by language. The image is not a doorway to an objective knowledge of the thing. Like Zukofsky, Bunting redresses the disparity of attention given to vision over craft. The process of this poem is self-watchful, attentive, and Bunting's measured rhythm conveys this sense of careful procession. The use of the word 'measure' illustrates the effects that can arise from such an attentiveness. Bunting releases four voices that exist as latent denotation in the word: it signifies the musical measure, or bar; the verse measure, or metre; the dance measure, or rhythmic movement; and the craftsman's measure, or rule.

Each of these are activated by contexts the poem supplies: the musical significance by ‘polyphonic score’; the poetic by its context in a poem called ‘The Word’; its significance in dancing by the word ‘tread’; and as a craftsman’s rule by the notion of dovetailing.

Suppleness is not only imparted to the poem’s design by the interlaced contexts that exercise each word, but also by the way in which Bunting uses assonance to weave words together into, in this instance, a two stanza long musical phrase. As in Zukofsky’s verse, it is difficult to isolate a single line for analysis due to the dependency of each line on the other eight for musical and syntactic significance: meaning is kept in transit. However, these lines may illustrate how the sound textures of words can be arranged to augment the content of a poem:

supple measure deftly
 as thought’s intricate polyphonic
 score dovetails with the tread
 (*Poetry*, 260)

The metric of this extract shifts from a trochaic foot in the first line, to something metrically unrecognisable in the second and third. The musical effects are more a matter of the rhythmic punctuation leant by the weight and duration of syllables and their placement in the verse line, than of rhythmic dissonances within an established metric. In this fragment, the lineation works against the strong assonantal relationship between ‘thought’ and ‘score’ to dovetail their respective lines together. ‘Score’ feels as though it naturally belongs to the preceding line. By placing ‘score’ at the head of the next, Bunting lessens the abrupt meeting of ‘score’ and ‘dovetailed’, which, were they separated by a line

break, would constitute a definite and unwanted cadence. Lineation works with and against the musical affinities that gather words into musical phrases, in order to extend the phrase.

For Bunting the patterns that language discerns in the material world are less problematic than Zukofsky finds them:

Celebrate man's craft
and the word spoken in shapeless night, the
sharp tool paring away
waste and the forms
cut out of mystery!

When the tight string's note
passes ear's reach, or red rays or violet
fade, strong over unseen
forces the word
ranks and enumerates. . . .

Mimes the clouds condensed
and the hewn hill and the bristling forests,
steadfast corn in its season
and the seasons
in their due array,

life of man's own body
and death. . . .

The sound thins into melody,
discourse narrowing, craft
failing, design
petering out;

ears heavy to breeze of speech and
thud of the ictus.
(*Poetry*, 260-261)

Bunting's adherence to Pound's dictum 'use no word that does not add to the direct

presentation of the thing' is both stated and demonstrated in this poem. The poet is a craftsman at his bench planing and chiselling his words into shapes that perfectly dovetail with the world: on the floor of the workroom lie the forms of Plato. Night is shapeless to us until we perceive it; there is no order until the empiricist supplies provisional descriptions and laws that, like those defining ultra-violet light and ultra-sonic sound, that reveal invisible forces and allow them to be controlled. Bunting substitutes the mysteries of science for the mysteries of religion. The poet celebrates the 'life of man's own body/ and death. . .'; the life and lifelessness of matter, not the 'spirit'. Towards the end of the poem, Bunting establishes an important dialectic between melody and polyphony, in which melody, or the single voice is equated with the loss of design and aesthetic fatigue. The highest form of composition produces the many voiced, or epic poem. Bunting, like Zukofsky, searches for provisional truths upon which a plan of action might be constructed. The difference between their use of language lies in the varying degrees of emphasis that they place on the poem as a referential structure. Zukofsky is prepared to risk abstraction in order to materialise the word more completely as a sign in a system of signs, whereas Bunting keeps the relation between word and thing precise.

*

In the second section of *An "Objectivists" Anthology*, which contains poems that might be characterised as 'lyric', Zukofsky included 'Arrangement from "Land's End"' by Forrest Anderson:

once is always

almost is surplus
 a little is all
 your partial my part

the almost of most?

well, neither of us yet.
 none becomes all
 according to each one
 near a plus and minus sea

I have explained myself in your words
 “the body preceded the Word”
 your contains mine
 (OA, 159)

Anderson’s poem provides no material context in which its redefinitions of quantity and ratio might make descriptive sense. These are phrases *in vacuo*. They conduct meaning through a series of perplexingly unorientated linguistic gestures. If this is an explanation in *our* words, or the words of an unspecified audience, then our words have failed to describe the common ground of material reality. The poem’s voice appears to indicate that discourse shaped by abstractions, ratios and the relativity of proportion, prevents the mediation of shared experience. It is not possible to be certain of a dialectical relationship between the failed explanation and the final assertion of a shared body, but it is still a definite shift. Suddenly there is a solid referent, something indicated that exists, as a whole, in material reality. By reversing the biblical relationship between the Logos and creation, the body becomes the ultimate origin of shared truth; the common site of an holistic communal being. The closure of the poem at this point may be taken as refusal to compromise the wholeness of that material being by subjecting it to the inevitably partial perspectives of linguistic representation. Contrast that communion through the body with this extract from H.D.’s poem ‘In the Rain’, included in *Imagist Anthology: 1930*.

I will bow
 to one God;
 (O my intimate song,
 my Lord,
 O fire
 and the Word,);
 (*Imagist 1930, 53*)

The 'Word', or Logos does not point towards the matter of the body or the world but acts as a medium for a transcendent presence. Even if the 'Lord' and 'God' of this speaker is a psychological manifestation, the word still points towards something that a materialist might argue was an abstraction.

Carl Rakosi's poem 'Before You', which lends its title to the sequence of his poems with which Zukofsky chose to open the 'Objectivists' issue of *Poetry*, closes with these lines:

Tumblers in the nebula,
 is not every man
 his own host?
 (*Poetry, 241*)

Is this a question addressed to the tumblers, or are they an image that illustrates the proposition that informs the question? The use of the word 'nebula' organises this ambiguity: it may refer to a heavenly configurations like the Horse-Head Nebula, or the Crab Nebula, or it may refer to an engulfing miasma. Given these two possible readings of nebula, the question may well be an interrogation of the purpose of the Rilkean, heavenward leaping of the tumblers, and the image of the tumblers may *also* work as an

illustration of the sense of epistemological disorientation and physical freedom that follows from the shrouding of divine effulgence. Which ever reading is made, the message ultimately remains the same: being is not an indivisible part of a Platonic ‘oneness’ or God, but located in the body; and the body is the only host, or sacrament and source of communion between people. By partaking of body, we partake in everyone’s body. This emphasis on the body, reminiscent of Whitman, can be seen as a counteractive measure to those poets who still attempted to hold ecstatic, neo-platonic communion with the Gods.

There is a dramatic transition from the abstract to the specifically referential in George Oppen’s poem ‘1930’S’, included in *An “Objectivists” Anthology*:

White. From the
Under arm of T

The red globe.

Up
Down. Round
Shiny fixed
Alternatives

From the quiet

Stone floor . . .
(*OA*, 43)

Knowing that this describes the control panel of an apartment lift,¹² it is tempting to read the poem as indicative of a material metonym of the 1930s, and also descriptive of the

¹² Tom Sharp, ‘George Oppen, *Discrete Series*, 1929-1934’, *George Oppen: Man and Poet*, ed. with introd. by Burton Hatlen (Orono, Maine: The National Poetry Library Foundation, Univ. of Orono at Maine, 1981), p. 281.

quiet moment of boredom when one is caught thoughtlessly facing that which irrefutably defines the present. However, the identity of the object described is retrospective information. Oppen gave the solution to this puzzling poem in an interview in the 1970s. It is questionable whether anyone would have made the connection between this enigmatic, Mondrian-like verbal object, and the material object it describes even back in the early 1930s. Oppen has removed all trace of an original subject-object relationship from the poem. All focus is on the operation of the words in the moment of reading. It begins with a series of abstract linguistic manoeuvres: what are ‘Shiny fixed/ Alternatives’? After existing in the linguistic space of prepositions that lack an obvious noun, the poem returns us to a solid point of reference; ‘the quiet/ Stone floor. . .’.

Kenneth Rexroth’s poem ‘Prolegomena to a Theodicy’ does not appear to describe an object or thing:

(a)
 This the mortared stone
 Heated
 The green lying over
 The tinsel white that ascends
 The rocker
 Aboard aboard
 It rustles rustles
 Should he acquiesce to forever flow
 No one shall ever enervate this structure
 (*OA*, 53)

The demonstrative pronoun that opens this poem never has the noun it demonstrates disclosed. In “‘Recencies’ in Poetry”, Zukofsky included a quote from Rexroth pertinent to this poem:

“The contingent object is incurably transitive” says Mr. Kenneth Rexroth, “to demand of it the same kind of completeness revealed in self-consciousness is to attempt to permit the observer identification with the observed as it is for itself. Only God”, concludes Mr. Rexroth with theological and poetic explicitness, “is thus “inside” (quotes) things.” (OA, 14)

The unspecified area of attention to which the demonstrative pronoun directs us is the contingent, transitive flow of sense that attends the chanted fragments of the poem. ‘This’ is meaning in process. Gertrude Stein’s comment that ‘an article remains as a delicate and varied something’,¹³ made in her 1934 American lecture series, could well be applied to Rexroth’s demonstrative pronoun. The whole poem is the vehicle of a metaphor that has no tenor, and in that sense lacking a destination, it is a poem of pure transit. Its material flow goes on uninterrupted by the possibility of comparison or closure. The statement, ‘No one shall ever enervate this structure’, is clear enough, but it is a small island of self-explanation in an overwhelming river of sense into which we are invited to deliquesce.

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In his essay ‘The Metaphysical Poets’, T.S. Eliot wrote: ‘A thought to Donne was an experience; it modified his sensibility.’¹⁴ This sentiment might well have been applied to Zukofsky’s poetry, and the poetry of a number of other ‘Objectivists’ during this period.

Eliot wrote in the same essay:

¹³ Gertrude Stein, *Lectures in America* (1934), with a new introd. by Wendy Steiner (First published New York: Random House, 1935; republished London: Virago Press Ltd, 1988), p. 213.

¹⁴ T. S. Eliot, ‘The Metaphysical Poets’, first published *Times Literary Supplement*, 20 October 1921, rpt in *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, ed. with introd. by Frank Kermode (London: Faber and Faber, 1975), p. 64.

We can only say that it appears likely that poets in our civilization, as it exists at present, must be *difficult*. . . .The poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning.¹⁵

Eliot reiterates the familiar avant-garde credo of defamiliarisation. Zukofsky was aware of Eliot's essay, as he quoted Eliot on the necessity of poetic difficulty in 'A Preface'. A poem like '—"Her Soil's Birth": (Madison)', is clearly structured to defamiliarise language. In a letter to Zukofsky, Williams wrote that he thought Zukofsky's poems were 'inventions richer in thought as image.'¹⁶ It is possible to illustrate Williams' point by moving outside the covers of *An "Objectivists" Anthology* and the 'Objectivists' issue of *Poetry*. Poem '15', dated to 1932 by Celia Zukofsky,¹⁷ from Zukofsky's '29 Poems', provides a good example:

Do not leave me
 before that convert surfeit
 which if it ever leaves toward you—
 never to your misgiving—
 inexistent
 comes first to me in another

That surfeit—other—which
 much less you do not look for, distraction
 from this our being together
 never surfeit—the owned
 devolving upon—owned—and neither owned—

That distraction which neither of us

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

¹⁶ William Carlos Williams: *The Selected Letters of William Carlos Williams*, ed. by John C. Thirlwell (New York: New Directions, 1984), p. 101.

¹⁷ Celia Zukofsky, 'Year By Year Bibliography of Louis Zukofsky', in *Louis Zukofsky: Man and Poet*, p. 389.

much less you, close, seeks—love
 never prior to your patience
 asks that surfeit come upon me first—
 unowned misgiving;

it is but a mouth's mumblings:
 no distraction coming
 after love, convert
 of your patience—a mouth knowing;
 close, its unowned owner.¹⁸

Is this the mumbled plea of an anxious lover needlessly trying to convince a patient lover to stay? Is this the work of a 'Painfully inarticulate soul' as Zukofsky's tutor at Columbia, Mark Van Doren, had referred to him; a quote Zukofsky inserted into "'A"4' as an act of solidarity with the misrepresented Yiddish-American poet Yehoash (*OA*, 126). Does the ending describe the reward of love as a release from intellectual anxiety into bodily 'knowing'? Is it a joke, a send-up of an ineffectual abstractly minded intellectual, or the performance of a tragic sense of ontology—'A ferocious mumbling, in public/ Of rootless speech', as George Oppen was later to put it?¹⁹ The poem is an enigma. It certainly has no 'root' in, or referential connection with, a concrete reality, other than through that reference to the mouth—a not unproblematic connection as the mouth and its unowned owner are not one and the same in the poem. The poem's metaphysical rhetorical structure awakens the expectation that it may be shaping towards the clinch of a resolved conceit, but its parts never fall into an orderly relationship. No sooner does a concept begin to voice itself, than it echoes off confusingly down the linguistic corridors

¹⁸ Louis Zukofsky, *Complete Short Poetry: Louis Zukofsky*, foreword by Robert Creeley (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins Univ. Press, 1991), p. 47-48.

¹⁹ George Oppen, 'Of Being Numerous: 17', *The Collected Poems Of George Oppen* (New York: New Directions, 1976), p. 159.

and anti-corridors of the poem's four stanza long hypotactic sentence, mazed, as it is, with endless modifications and negatively qualified abstractions.

However, without wishing to halter a poem never intended to be broken, what the poem refuses to name may give an indication of its 'function'. Its 'narrative' trajectory, if such it can be called, moves from uncertainty to 'a knowing mouth'. Curiously, for what appears to be a love poem, it makes no other reference to the body, and avoids the conventions and vocabularies of erotic and neo-platonic love. Instead, it describes the accumulation of something paradoxically called 'convert surfeit' in response to patient love. At one level, the poem appears to meditate on the problems and mysteries of communication through the physical interval separating people. Indeed, the subject's 'inexistent', 'convert surfeit' may never leave 'toward' the 'you' in the poem. It may be as a result of this epistemological concern that the issue of ownership becomes a central paradox: how can one truly think of owning, definitively knowing, or objectifying another person if it is granted they possess a discrete consciousness that cannot be directly experienced. Can one even talk of owning oneself, or of self-possession? The implication is that thought about the 'other' must be recognised to be provisional interpretation. Indeed, the poem's refraction of meaning may constitute a tactical attempt to enforce this recognition. Resisting interpretive assimilation, or effacement by the overlaying of an interpretation, the poem asserts the otherness of itself, and by extension the otherness of all objects. The dynamic also works in the other direction. The poem refuses to occupy the reader's imagination with a stable sentiment.

In "Recencies" in Poetry' Zukofsky wrote: 'the order of all poetry is to approach

a state of music wherein the ideas present themselves sensuously and intelligently and are of no predatory intention' (*OA*, 24). Poem '15' certainly does not exhibit 'predatory intention'— even if its ideal of the non-idea is inevitably not presented sensuously. It is an impenetrable surface left for us to interpret, rather than the carrier of an immanent will that has designs on our intellects. It is simply a structure in which thought can experience the qualities of being thought. Another factor supporting this ethical reading of the poem's unstable sense is apparent in its substitution of the vocabularies of erotic and transcendental love for a quasi-economic terminology. This non-predatory exchange of meaning is described in terms that equate love with an ideal exchange economy in which surfeit, or sufficiency, is constantly converted, exchanged, and never hoarded. If this is credible, then meaning is the intellectual equivalent of currency and definition a kind of intellectual capitalism, or hoarding of meaning. Zukofsky's theme shares similarities with Pound's 'Canto XXXVI', the difference being that the mystery remains at a textual level. While speaking this poem we possess neither ourselves, nor the sentiment of the poet, but simply a curious sensation of meaning in process that confers 'a knowing mouth'.

In his essay on 'American Poetry 1920-1930', Zukofsky wrote that Williams' poem 'Paterson' (*Poems 1927*)²⁰ was 'a definite metaphysical concept: the thought is the thing which, in turn, produces the thought'.²¹ Thought (language) not the object is the cause of poetic ignition. There is also an important relationship between the 'metaphysicality' of a poem and its status as linguistic object: the more a poem concentrates on the language

²⁰ William Carlos Williams, 'Paterson' in *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams, Vol. 1, 1909-1939*, ed. A. Walton Litz and Christopher MacGowan (London: Paladin Grafton Books, 1991), pp. 263-266.

²¹ Louis Zukofsky, 'American Poetry 1920-1930', p. 69.

of thought, the more it signifies its wordedness, its physicality. For *Poetry*, Zukofsky selected perhaps the most ‘metaphysical’ poem from Williams’ oeuvre, ‘Botticellian Trees’:

The alphabet of
the trees

is fading in the
song of the leaves

the crossing
bars of the thin

letters that spelled
winter

and the cold
have been illumined

with
pointed green

by the rain and sun
the strict simple

principles of
straight branches

are being modified
by pinched out

ifs of colour, devout
conditions

the smiles of love

.

until the stript
sentences

move as a woman’s
limbs under cloth

and praise from secrecy
with hot ardor

love's ascendancy
in summer—

in summer the song
sings itself

above the muffled words—
(*Poetry*, 266-67)

By making the letters of the alphabet icons for winter trees, Williams employs the scale of semiotic complexity that ascends from letter to word to sentence to metaphor and ultimately to song, as an analogy for the crescendo of life towards high-summer. What transforms letters into spoken music? Perhaps it is the desire to make the semiotic experience co-present with the physical, rhythmic action of making sound: to tie meaning to an origin in the hum of the valved throat. According to Williams, song is a flowering of erotic energy; it is the 'hot ardor' of a woman's body, and the ecstatic atmosphere of life that surrounds trees in full leaf. These analogies are achieved without the fabric of the poem being effaced by the projection of a visual fantasy. Instead, we are allowed an opportunity to marvel at how a sentence can represent a 'woman's limbs'; and how letters can spell a season and open us to memories of its character. But it is only a brief opportunity. The unresolved phrasal units that constitute Williams' basic line unit continually make and break the spell of representation as they flow one into the other in this otherwise well ordered syntactic structure. The poem uses this gradual disclosure of its syntactic trajectory to take the object referred to through a subtle process of transformation. For instance, the object described in the line 'pointed green', which, legitimately, one might have imagined to be synecdoche for leaves, becomes 'pinched out/

ifs of colour'. There is no mention of leaves. Suddenly Williams forces an act of revision. Is he talking about an illuminated manuscript? This would be an apt analogy for this poem which operates as a kind of illustrated text. But why does he describe pointed green as 'ifs of colour'. Does 'if' somehow refer to their shape? I think it is more complicated. In some strange way 'pointed green' has the quality of 'if-ness'; green, the colour of life and leaves, is like the conjunction that introduces a hypothetical statement - simple! Well, perhaps it is. 'If' modifies 'strict simple/ principles' by making them conditional. In other words, Williams might be intimating that life and love are of the nature of conditional beliefs.

Williams' description of the Washington Monument included in *An "Objectivists" Anthology*, politicises the tension between syntax and lineation. Williams tries to translate the monument's representation of the history of Independent America into a poetic equivalent. He reads the 'superb' 'scaleless//jumble' of its apparently non-hierarchical composition as the artistic equivalent of the democratic state. Consequently, his translation attempts to find the syntactic equivalent of this democratic jumble of objects in the picture-plane. To achieve this he omits punctuation, leaving both clause and sentence without closure. It is therefore impossible to establish a hierarchical relationship between the clauses and the objects they contain. And the line unit, as we have already seen in 'Botticellian Trees', is used to fragment the expected unit of sense and fuse the resultant parts with unusual company:

Commerce Minerva
Thomas

Jefferson John Hancock
at

the table Mrs. Motte
presenting

Indian burning arrows
to Generals

Marion and Lee to fire
her mansion

and dislodge the British—
(*OA*, 99-100)

Perhaps in recognition of the limitations of this icon of American history, Williams omits a final full-stop, implying that this picture is incomplete and beyond completion.

*

In the appendix note to *Active Anthology* (1933) Ezra Pound wrote:

A whole school or shoal of young American writers seems to me to have lost contact with language as language. . . in particular Mr Zukofsky's Objectivists seem prone to this error. . .

The trouble began before 1920. The special student can at leisure untangle the various currents. Marianne Moore, Mina Loy.²²

And continued:

How far is a writer justified in “mathematical” rather than linguistic use

²² *Active Anthology*, ed. Ezra Pound (London: Faber and Faber, 1933), pp. 253-254.

of language?

One of my colleagues says he “likes that mathematical use”. I think the good poem ought probably to include that dimension without destroying the feel of actual speech.²³

What had gone wrong? In *How to Read* (1929), Pound had described the responsibilities of literary creation:

It has to do with the clarity and vigour of ‘any and every’ thought and opinion. It has to do with maintaining the very cleanliness of the tools, the health of the very matter of thought itself. . . when their very medium, the very essence of their work, the application of word to thing goes rotten, i.e. becomes slushy and inexact, or excessive or bloated, the whole machinery of social and individual thought and order goes to pot.²⁴

Pound may not have believed Mina Loy’s or Marianne Moore’s work ‘slushy and inexact’, but according to Pound’s statement made in *Active Anthology* they were strands of the tendency which had culminated in the Objectivists’ loss of contact with ‘language as language’. It is fair to surmise that Pound’s opinion of the Objectivists was related to their frequent and deliberate refusal to refer to the world outside their poems, which, at times, gives their poetry the quality of an abstract, non-referential sign-system. Pound does not choose to identify the careful balance maintained in Objectivist poetry between the exploration of language as an abstract system and the referential use of language; nor does he identify the ethical motives informing the presentation of the poem as a verbal ‘thing in itself’.

²³ Ibid., p. 254.

²⁴ *How to Read*, first published in *The New York Herald-Tribune*, January 1929, rpt in *The Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, ed. with introd. by T.S. Eliot (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1954), p. 21.

The elaborate verbal textures of the poems of Loy and Moore may be the reason why Pound selected them as the new parents to which he consigned his erstwhile literary off-spring. The final two stanzas from Loy's poem 'Brancusi's Golden Bird' run:

This gong
of polished hyperaesthesia
shrills with brass
as the aggressive light
strikes
its significance

The immaculate
conception
of the inaudible bird
occurs
in gorgeous reticence²⁵

Hyperaesthesia is 'an abnormally great sensitivity of the body and mind, esp. of the skin' (OED). Loy's poem sensitively constructs an intriguing and impenetrable textual skin in an enaction of her sense of the 'gorgeous reticence' of Brancusi's impenetrable surfaces. The poem's seamless and slippery surface depends on the confusions, suspensions and leaps of significance created by paradox, synaesthesia and free transformations of the descriptive trope. It is perhaps this tactical refusal to divulge intention, this refusal to yield to the demand for explanation and definition that may have lead Pound to link her with the Objectivists.

Moore might well have been included for melting the sharp edged scalpels of words into scalp, for turning the operating theatre of language into a theatre of fabulous illusions

²⁵ Mina Loy, 'Brancusi's Golden Bird', *The Lost Lunar Baedeker*, ed. Roger L. Conover (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1996), p. 79-80.

and echoes:

THOSE VARIOUS SCALPELS,

those
 various sounds consistently indistinct, like intermingled echoes
 struck from thin glasses successively at random—
 the inflection disguised: your hair, the tails of two
 fighting-cocks head to head in stone—
 like sculptured scimitars repeating the curve of you ears in
 reverse order:
 your eyes, flowers of ice and snow²⁶

In the absence of the referential object, the object pointed at by the demonstrative pronoun ‘**THOSE**’, becomes language itself. The poem is the site of unlikely transformations: sharp scalpels can become ‘indistinct, like intermingled echoes’: these words refuse to operate as tools designed to cut to the truth about a given object. As the poem does not specify how these words apply to ‘things’, it is not possible to say whether their use is either ‘slushy or inexact’. The thread of sense connecting the internal movements of the poem may be fine but they are certainly identifiable. One way to link scimitars and curves to the phrase ‘the inflection disguised’, is to recollect that ‘inflection’ is a synonym for curvature. Inflection is literally being disguised as it migrates into a series of curved objects. Marianne Moore is astoundingly precise in the way she dovetails her fragments together; but the absence of a definite object, the absence of a definite relationship between word and thing, may have led Pound to include her as one of the origins of the Objectivist aesthetic.

²⁶ Marianne Moore, *The Complete Poems of Marianne Moore* (London: Faber and Faber, 1984), p. 51.

CHAPTER 3

AN UNLIKELY BRIGADE

Sonny will eventually go back to N.Y.—the only Jerusalem—
—Louis Zukofsky, *P/Z*, 62.

*

A dismissive review of *An "Objectivists" Anthology* by the poet and critic Yvor Winters provoked the following counter-offensive by Basil Bunting:

Sirs:

No one who has vainly attempted to fathom the complacency of Yvor Winters' flat verse will have been much astonished by his view of Mr. Zukofsky's "Objectivists", but it is astonishing that a thick quarterly such as yours, that still has a shred or two of the reputation Pound's contributions gave its early numbers, should print it.

Or perhaps this Winters perceived that my poem—I am, with the rest, 'a sensory impressionist of the usual sort who knows nothing of writing' (but Winters will be in a better position to judge of that before I have finished with him)—perceived, I say, that my poem in the first pages of "Objectivists" was contrived in part for the exhibition of just such as he, who, 'devolvit ili sibi pondera', now envy the whole man. No fool much likes being laughed at. He was afraid, maybe, to go for someone who seemed to have discovered the disgrace he fondly believed secret, so he turned his spite on the anthology's editor.¹

What was Yvor Winters' secret source of 'disgrace'? In the third movement of Bunting's poem 'Attis: Or Something Missing' (*OA*, 33-35), included in *An "Objectivists" Anthology*, the newly self-castrated Attis grieves for his testicles. He stiffens 'amid the snows' of winter in the only way now left to him (*OA*, 33). Making use of the *double-entendre* available in the verb 'to stiffen', Bunting establishes the tone of bitter comedy

¹ Basil Bunting, 'Letter to the Editor, 21/10/1932', *Hound and Horn*, VI (1933), 322-323.

with which he treats the Attis/Cybele fertility myth and its metaphor of maimed masculinity. Attis' castration is not just physical. It might be imagined that the original priests and followers of Cybele took consolation from the belief that their self-castration ensured the return of Spring.² They were, perhaps, more heroic than ridiculous. But Bunting's Attis is bereft both of his testicles, and of the language capable of signifying the importance of his sacrifice: he has forgotten 'the responses to/ the ithyphallic hymns' (*OA*, 34). Without the compelling context of these words, Attis' action becomes absurd. As we have seen in 'The Word', (*Poetry*, 260-261) Bunting's method of restoring linguistic potency involves the unequivocal naming of things and particulars, and the avoidance of generalisations, universals and abstractions. The scientific application of word to event provides Bunting with the obvious evidence of this new potency at work: 'strong over unseen/ forces the word/ ranks and enumerates' (*Poetry*, 260). Through its ability to predict behaviour, the scientific word becomes akin to the spell— only a little more effective.

This macho epistolary tussle with Winters, in which the phallus signifies strength, and its absence dithering effeminacy, may indicate the anxieties that afflicted Bunting as he sought to reconstruct the epistemological grounds on which he might act with manly vigour and a sense of poetic honour and responsibility. In *Basil Bunting: The Shaping of his Verse*, Peter Makin has described the theme of castration in Bunting's poetry of this period as 'a metaphor for cowardice in poetry', a metaphor he was also willing to use in

² James Frazer speculated on the 'passionate and lifelong regret' the priests and followers of Cybele felt after making their irrevocable sacrifice in *The Golden Bough: A History Of Myth and Religion* (London: Macmillan & Co. Ltd., 1922, rpt., London: Chancellor Press, 1994), p. 350.

a self-accusatory manner.³ In an undated letter to Pound circa 1931, Bunting wrote: ‘Atthis, if ever penetrated . . . is unfair to Eliot. These Bodenhs and the other too-good-for-America s shd have been slain first, being more indubitably gelded.’⁴ Despite similarities of technique, ‘Attis: Or Something Missing’ is clearly not a pastiche of *The Waste Land*, and certainly not an example of ‘sensory impressionism’, perhaps the most stinging insult that could be levelled at an anti-‘Amygist’. How does it relate to Eliot; and more specifically, how does it relate to the example of Eliot’s work with which the anthology places it in dialogue? At the end of Bunting’s poem, Cybele provides an enigmatic riddle which, with its enslaving ‘peacock’, cheating ‘roses’, and pretentious ‘myrtles’ (*OA*, 35), may indicate that Attis’ continuing impotence derives from a misplaced desire for the immortality these objects symbolise. Instead of deriving strength from the particular soil of Dindyma (the name of the mountain sacred to Cybele) in which, in one strophe of the poem, he takes root as a pine-tree, Attis hankers after the otherworldly (*OA*, 34).

In ‘Marina’, Eliot’s contribution to *An “Objectivists” Anthology*, the destination towards which its persona journeys is described in terms that have a distinctly metaphysical tenor. He searches for a daughter with a richly suggestive name: is he the Pericles of Shakespeare’s eponymous play, who also sailed in search of a lost daughter called ‘Marina’? In the light of her oceanic associations is Marina a type of the Virgin Mary? It is not clear. Also unclear is the reason for the presence of this poem in Zukofsky’s

³ ‘Basil Bunting to Ezra Pound (circa 1931) (Yale)’, quoted in Peter Makin, *Basil Bunting: The Shaping of his Verse* (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1992), p. 82.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

revolutionary, nominalist, anthology: for while Eliot's persona may name the parts of a boat with a sailor's precision ('The garboard strake leaks, the seams need caulking' (*OA*, 161)), he ultimately wants to abandon this material speech for one that is distinctly metaphysical:

This form, this face, this life
 Living to live in a world of time beyond me; let me
 Resign my life for this life, my speech for that unspoken,
 The awakened, lips parted, the hope, the new ships.
 (*OA*, 161)

In his desire for a better life sensed to exist, paradoxically, both within and beyond his present existence, the persona of 'Marina' resembles St. Paul's description of the Old Testament patriarchs:

13 These all died in faith, not have received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of *them*, and embraced *them*, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. 14 For they that say such things declare plainly that they seek a country.
 (*Hebrews*: 11: 13-14)

Filtering out these echoes, which may or may not be relevant, Eliot's persona can certainly be said to live in an emotional state of loss and anticipation. The world presented by the poem becomes the haunt of memory rather than a field of empirical study. Read in the context of Bunting's 'Attis: Or Something Missing' and 'The Word', a clear difference of world view becomes apparent between the two poets. Where Eliot's persona renounces the present for the promise of the future, Bunting advocates a more empirical, active participation in shaping and being within the present material world. However, Eliot's

poem, better than any other, emotionally animates the themes of exile and incompleteness that run through the ‘Objectivists’ issue of *Poetry* and *An “Objectivists” Anthology* at a formal and ‘narrative’ level.

Accusations that Eliot had betrayed the responsibilities entailed with the gift of his talent had been voiced ever since the publication of *The Waste Land*. Alluding to the closing lines of Eliot’s poem, Pound famously wrote: ‘These fragments you have shelved (shored).’ (*Cantos*, 28) Eliot was perceived by Pound and Williams to have settled for the consolations of library pleasures at a time when he should have been drawing up blueprints for action.⁵ To use Bunting’s terminology, one might say that he had lost his balls. While Zukofsky was working on his issue of *Poetry*, Pound ironically suggested that he cite ‘the sinister shadows’ (28 October 1930, *P/Z*, 55) afflicting contemporary poetry. In a letter dated 12 December 1930, Zukofsky responded:

“The” was a direct reply to The Waste Land—meant to avoid T.S.E.’s technique, line etc (tho I see how much more lucid it is than my own) occasional slickness, but intended to tell him why, spiritually speaking, a wimpus was still possible and might even bear fruit of another generation. (*P/Z*, 78-79)

‘Poem Beginning “The”’ opens by stating:

- 4 A boy’s best friend is his mother,
- 5 It’s your mother all the time.
- 6 Residue of Oedipus-faced wrecks
- 7 Creating out of the dead,—

⁵ ‘Eliot returned us to the classroom just at the moment when I felt we were on the point of escape to matters much closer to the essence of a new art form itself—rooted in the locality which should give it fruit’. William Carlos Williams, *The Autobiography of William Carlos Williams* (New York: New Directions, 1951), p. 174.

(Exile 3, 9)

By directly identifying the existence of Oedipal desires, Zukofsky addresses that which Eliot only suggests obliquely through the symbolic events and mythological allusions that comprise *The Waste Land*. A Freudian reading of Eliot's poem might identify the origin of the epiphany that closes the second strophe of 'The Burial of the dead' not as divine revelation, but as the ego's amnesiac response to an irruption of repressed Oedipal desires stimulated by the appearance of 'the hyacinth girl': 'I could not/ Speak, and my eyes failed'.⁶ If repression leads to a form of perceptual self-castration, one can understand why Zukofsky, so keen on the metaphor of seeing clearly, was keen to prevent any interpretation of his own poem as the sublimated image produced by an unresolved Oedipus complex. He signals that his poem does not stand for an unspoken psychological condition.

If shamefulness thrives on secrecy, Zukofsky's exposure of the Oedipus complex can be seen as a remedial measure; a measure perhaps intended to release the individual from guilty procrastination. In 'Poem Beginning "The"', he asks this question: '17 But why are our finest always dead?' (*Exile 4, 10*). This could be an echo of Pound's line in 'Hugh Selwyn Mauberley: (*Life and Contacts*)', 'There died a myriad,/ And of the best, among them,'—a line that refers to those of Pound's associates who died in The Great War.⁷ However, this question is followed by a list of literary characters, each of whom could be identified as suffering from an unresolved Oedipus complex. Zukofsky includes: 'Stephen Daedalus'; Pound's 'Mauberley'; and D.H. Lawrence's 'Lovat' from the novel

⁶ T.S. Eliot, *Collected Poems*, p. 64.

⁷ Ezra Pound, *Ezra Pound: Selected Poems 1908-1959* (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1975), p. 101

Kangaroo (*Exile* 3, 10). He appears to be questioning the suitability of these characters as role-models. Each could be said to ‘live’ in a state of exile both from themselves and the world that demands and needs their engagement. They are unable to act decisively, or love passionately. Zukofsky dramatises his own escape from the influence of these models of behaviour. The process begins with an expression of assent; ‘36 O do you take this life as your lawful wife, / I do!’ (*Exile* 3, 11): like Leopold Bloom he is prepared to love; like Molly Bloom he says yes. Zukofsky’s persona breaks the spell of the ‘*olde bokes*’ (*Exile* 3, 9) of his predecessors by shifting his attention from the analysis of the psychological causes and consequences of shame and guilt, to the study of the present, material world. This has a liberating effect: ‘53 The blind portals opening, and I awoke!’ (*Exile* 3, 12). His escape from the oppressive effects of literary history is not final: the spells of ‘*old bokes*’ remain potent and have to be shaken off:

54 Let me be
 55 Not by art have we lived,
 56 Not by graven images forbidden to us
 57 Not by letters I fancy.
 58 Do we dare say
 59 With Spinoza grinding lenses. . .
 (*Exile* 3, 12)

Zukofsky’s restatement of the Jewish prohibition on making ‘graven images’ curiously rhymes him with the iconoclastic, ‘Puritan’ strand in American literature. It also makes Jewishness, in its non-orthodox, Spinozan form, inextricable from the discoveries of the Enlightenment. Like Bunting, Zukofsky instances the redirection of attention away from the self towards the scientific study of the material world as a remedy for all that the castration metaphor stands for.

*

Mary Butts' poem 'Corfe', which succeeds 'Attis: Or Something Missing' in *An "Objectivists" Anthology*, strongly counterpoints Bunting's sense that the sacred rituals have withered to mere pantomime. This is how the third movement of 'Corfe' begins:

III

God keep the Hollow Land from all wrong !
 God keep the Hollow Land going strong !
 A song a boy made in a girl
 Brother and sister in a car
 Over the flints, upon the turf
 Beside the crook-backed angry thorn
 Under the gull above the dead
 To where the light made the grass glass.
 (OA, 38)

While the 'song a boy made in a girl' may or may not be a euphemism for having sex, the song certainly seems to have seminal aspirations. It conjures life, sometimes in a comic, Audenesque manner: 'Curl horns and fleeces, straighten trees,/ Multiply lobsters, assemble bees.' (OA, 38) That they are brother and sister, and that his song summons life, offers this pair up for interpretation as types of Isis and Osiris. In contrast to Bunting's 'Attis', the boy has no problem in uttering a contemporary form of 'ithyphallic hymn'. Amid the living and the dead he speaks himself into the chaotic, procreative forces of nature. He wills himself into the elemental existence of the world. These are powerful, phallic words. Butts' rhyming couplets give the passage a chant-like, harum-scarum energy; there is none of the syntax of uncertainty that may be identified in Zukofsky's poem 'Prop. LXI'. The spell woven through the hymn invokes the supernatural, ancestral inhabitants of the

landscape: 'Swarm on the down-tops the flint mens' host/ Taboo the barrows, encourage ghosts' (*OA*, 39). The boy calls for the land to assert its sacred significance and repel the profane: 'Give it to us for ever . . . / Turn back our folk from it, we hate the lot/ Turn the American and turn the Scot ' (*OA*, 38-39). In the context of Zukofsky's encouragement of the 'non-predatory' imagination this supplication made to the spirit of place seems almost xenophobic. It implies that the authentic significance and presence of Corfe is only available to those with local knowledge, and can only be preserved by checking the culturally erosive effects of 'the stranger' (*OA*, 39). The girl's body is made the bearer of this threatened significance by the boy's song: he makes it 'in' her. The history of place is metaphorically incorporated into her body, as if it were the living seed that ensured a blood connection between her off-spring and the land.

However, the possessive desires of the boy and girl could also be interpreted as the protective feelings of the custodian: they are defensive only in order to repel a more dangerous, predatory force:

Strong graceless kharki legs in silhouette
Tired and tough, treading the hill down.

He will not wear it down
Let him try !
He is here only because this place is
A button on the bodies of the green hills.
(*OA*, 38)

It is difficult to ascertain the precise significance of the motive that the boy and girl provide for the presence of this soldierly, masculine figure, but clearly they do not feel it

to be the same as their own. They sense he wants to ‘wear’ ‘down’ the landscape; to subject its otherness to his will rather than open himself to its strangeness. It is possible to interpret this as a poem in which the landscape operates as the feminine other to a predatory, dominating, masculinity. However, this reading is undermined by the fact that the children are opposed to the presence of all strangers, male and female.

By incorporating the meaning of place into the body of the young girl Butts appears to echo the those nationalist discourses of the 1930s that made an essential connection between place, blood and cultural identity. Yeats’ poetry of the 1930s provides perhaps an obvious example of this discourse in operation. However, by calling for the landscape to turn back their own ‘folk’ as well as foreigners, the desires of the children in Butts’ poem evade being fitted neatly into this discourse. Zukofsky’s decision to open the anthology with Bunting’s translation of the Attis myth to Northumbria, and Butts’ divination of a Dorset landscape, suggests an affiliation between the Objectivist configuration and the British regions. This is perhaps confirmed by Pound’s ridiculing of the Bloomsbury set in his ‘Words for Roundel in Double Canon’ (*OA*, 45-46). However, the attitude of Butts’ children does duplicate, in miniature, the nation that would prevent ‘the stranger’ from trespassing both on the land and the sacred history that the land signifies. In the context of Zukofsky’s emphasis on the detailing of local experience Butts’ mysticism also feels anomalous, and only distantly related to an ethical system based on respect and ontological openness. In ‘A Morning Imagination of Russia’ Williams writes: ‘His hatreds and his loves were without walls’. (*OA*, 108) The beauty of the Objectivist conception of being lies in its portability: home is anywhere one manages an intense state of attention to the material world. If everyone pursued the atavistic relationship to place that Butts expresses

in 'Corfe' there would be no shared space and no cultural cross-fertilisation.

In his regular 'Commentary' for the *Criterion*, published in April 1930, T.S. Eliot wrote:

The American intellectual of today has almost no chance of continuous development upon his own soil and in the environment which his ancestor, however humble, helped to form.⁸

As a consequence, the American intellectual may be the poor relation and poor imitation of his European counterpart. This, and similar editorial comments, must have prompted Zukofsky to declare in "Recencies" in Poetry that, 'the editor of *The Criterion* is becoming more inelegant every day' (OA, 11). Some ambiguity exists as to how Eliot's statement should be read. Is Eliot referring to the intellectual whose ancestors originally settled America, and whose cultural roots have now been disturbed by immigration and economic change; or to the recently immigrated American intellectual who has left his 'natal' soil. The connection between 'his own soil' (clearly American soil) and that of 'his ancestor' who mulched that cultural soil (therefore presumably American settlers), suggests the former. In which case, the glaring assumption behind Eliot's Agrarian metaphor is that the American intellectual will come from a well established American family.

Where does the son of a Jewish immigrant fit into this picture of the American

⁸ T.S. Eliot, 'A Commentary', *The Criterion*, Vol. X, No. 40, April 1931, p. 484.

intelligentsia? The answer to this became clearer in 1933 when Eliot, addressing those in attendance at his lectures given at the University of Virginia, gave the following cultural salute:

You are farther away from New York, you have been less industrialised and less invaded by foreign races; and you have more opulent soil.⁹

He went on to add:

. . . reasons of race and religion combine to make any large number of free-thinking Jews undesirable.¹⁰

There was Zukofsky's answer, had he needed one. Eliot viewed the immigrant, and in particular the intelligent, liberal minded Jew, as a source of cultural dilution and destabilisation. Eliot's equation of racial purity and continuity of settlement with cultural 'opulence' not only judged Zukofsky and his fellow urban Americans incapable of 'continuous development', but made Zukofsky the very cause and sign of its absence among his peers. In this context, it is possible to read Zukofsky's critique of 'pure' poetry in "Recencies" in Poetry' as an attack on the kind of critical 'philosophy' that sustains such assumptions. Not only does the critical follower of Eliot, quoted in "Recencies" in Poetry', dislocate Samuel Johnson's writing from the evidence of its historical context, but repositions it within a fantasy of his character that reflects the critic's peculiarly Agrarian

⁹ T.S. Eliot, *After Strange Gods: A Primer of Modern Heresy: The Page-Barbour Lectures at the University of Virginia 1933* (London: Faber and Faber, 1934), p. 16.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

ideal. He states:

“To write poetry so precise, lucid and pure, one must be what the Southern negro calls a settled person ; one must be mature ; one must live in a world that offers the least evidence of the [sic] ceaseless social change. One must not be distracted by too much speculation, or lost in the mutability of sensation. One’s mind must be made up : such a poet will have taste.”
(*OA*, 12)

Who would want this kind of taste, born, as it is, out of narrow-mindedness and prejudice?

This critic, designated a follower of Eliot by Zukofsky, clearly does not believe in the artistic opportunities of metropolitan life, or in the rich possibilities of cultural exchange and hybridisation.

It may be possible to read the first of Pound’s two contributions to *An “Objectivists” Anthology*, ‘The Yittisher Charleston Band’, as an example of cultural miscegenation; just as it is possible to consider its verbal texture in keeping with Zukofsky’s emphasis on the poem as a verbal object:

Gentle Jheezus sleek and wild
Found disciples tall an’ hairy
Flirting with his red hot Mary,
 Now hot momma Magdelene
 Is doing front page fer the screen
 Mit der yittischer Charleston Pband
 Mit
deryiddischercharles
 tonband.

(*OA*, 44)

Zukofsky’s pleasure at being able to publish this poem was unequivocal. In his letter to

Pound dated 12 October 1931 Zukofsky wrote: ‘Dear E: I cannot know how to too much offer my thanks —’(P/Z, 99). For the reader with the hindsight of Twentieth Century history, a poem by Pound that mimics a Yiddish voice feels automatically dangerous, and potentially an anti-Semitic piece of ridicule. However, it is not clear whether Jewishness is being made to signify the shallow, glitzy commercialism of American culture, or the vitality of American popular culture. In a note appended to the poem Zukofsky quotes from Pound’s correspondence concerning its publication: ‘*You can note it belongs to the best and most active period of jazz ; before the new neo sentimentalism set in. E. P.*’ (OA, 45). This alignment of the ‘*best and most active period of jazz*’ with a Jewish ‘*Charleston BAND*’ (OA, 44) would suggest the latter. But counteracting this positive note is Pound’s link between the Jewish band and his cartoon cliché of black African womanhood:

ole king Bolo’s big black queen
 Whose bum was big as a soup tureen
 Has lef’ the congo
and is now seen
 Mit der *etc.*
 (OA, 44)

With her big bum and Congolese origin ‘she’ comes close to embodying the stereotypical modernist conception of Africa as a place of primitive fertility and unrepressed sexual energy. From a contemporary perspective this is offensive. As she seems to have been called forth from Africa by ‘*der yittischer Charleston Pband*’, these Jazz playing Jews participate in her cartoon ‘primitive’ energy. While perhaps not blatantly anti-Semitic in the context of the 1930s, there is a distinctly pejorative quality to the exaggerations and distortions Pound makes to the Yiddish accent, as if its sounds were a fit source of comic

entertainment.

How could a Jewish writer publish such a poem? In a letter to Pound written on the 12 December 1929 Zukofsky made this flippant but perhaps telling aside: ‘The only good Jew I know is my father: a coincidence.’ (*P/Z*, 27) After the rejection of a translation submitted to *The Menorah Journal*, a journal dedicated to publishing Jewish writing, Zukofsky wrote to Pound: ‘I’ve always avoided them, wished to avoid them, and things seem to be turning out the way I wanted them to’ (12 January 1930, *P/Z*, 32). Mingled with Zukofsky’s injured pride is a desire to avoid classification according to his cultural/racial origins. In ‘Poem Beginning “The”’, Zukofsky shows himself prepared to adopt a light cloak of anti-Semitism in order to further his assimilation:

251 Assimilation is not hard,
 252 And once the Faith’s askew
 253 I might as well look Shagetz just as much
 as Jew.
 254 I’ll read their Donne as mine,
 255 And leopard in their spots
 (*Exile* 3, 23)

The old adage that ‘a leopard cannot change its spots’ suggests that there is an essential connection between appearances and the individual’s nature. Try as we might, our spiritual and racial condition will manifest itself. Nineteenth Century American literature contains numerous examples in which taints in the soul or blood of a character eventually disclose themselves. Zukofsky exploits this essentialist and potentially racist prejudice to his own ends. By accurately and energetically assuming the cultural spots of John Donne’s poetry Zukofsky can pass incognito in a world of face-values. He becomes the verb *to*

leopard; an animating force, rather than the signs of a classifiable type or identity. His individuality becomes the skill with which he performs within these cultural costumes and roles.

From a contemporary perspective, one might point out that the spots of culture should not be worn irresponsibly: is it really the same to look ‘Shagetz’ (Yiddish for an anti-Semitic Jew), as it is to look like a non-religious Jew? There are at least two other ways in which Zukofsky’s preparedness to seem ‘Shagetz’ can be read: as an example of the freedom many escapees from religion feel to ridicule the faiths they have battled to escape; and secondly, as the antipathy towards organised religion of a Marxist committed to the formulation of a new and binding ‘sociological myth’. Zukofsky was clearly wary of Judaism’s potential exclusivity. In “‘A’-4”, the voices of Zukofsky’s orthodox forebears, who ‘Set masts in dingheys, chanted the Speech’ (*OA*, 127), lament the erosion of the religion and language that united them in their wandering: ‘We had a Speech, our children have/ evolved a jargon.’ (*OA*, 124) They continue:

Dead loved stones of our Temple walls,
Ripped up pebble-stones of our tessellation,
Split cedar chest harbouring our Law,
Even the Death has gone out of us—we are void.

“He calleth for Elias”
(Clavicembalo !)

God, deafen us to their music
Our own children have passed over to the
ostracized

(*OA*, 125)

Zukofsky is one of those wayward children. He uses the music of Bach's *Matthew Passion* and the story it tells as a model for "'A"1-7'. However, the analogy of fugal composition Zukofsky draws from Bach provides him with a means of making a poem out of a number of voices. Through distancing himself from his religious inheritance Zukofsky is able to meditate on his Jewish roots within the context of a polyphonic construction of America; a construction in which both 'jargon' and 'Speech' share equal status. He can avoid the exclusion implicit in the 'Speech' of his forefathers. This desire to include and relate different voices, no matter how inevitably flawed and selective in practice, is the democratic and revolutionary principle that "'A"1-7' tries to embody. It is a 'song out of the voices' (*OA*, 120); a new tessellation made up not of stones but textual fragments. Zukofsky is able to align his sense of cultural duality, of possessing 'two voices', (*OA*, 130) with his internationalism: "'Your people ?" "All people.'" (*OA*, 130). Kinship is the harmony and dialogue of different voices, not a blood relationship: "'Yehoash" : song's kinship/ The roots we strike' (*OA*, 127). There is a wonderful ambiguity contained in the notion of *striking* the roots of kinship. It both suggests the desire to find common ground through song (i.e. 'to strike root'), and the desire to destroy (i.e. 'strike out', or 'strike down') the very notion of roots. Using this ambiguity Zukofsky is able to assert kinship through language at the same moment he destroys the notion of an essential, blood connection.

*

The poet Charles Reznikoff felt less ambivalent about his Jewishness. Most of his contributions to the 'Objectivists' issue of *Poetry* and *An "Objectivists" Anthology* were

published in the 1934 collection *Jerusalem the Golden*. In this collection he explores the tension he feels between his sense of being an outsider, a Jew exiled from Jerusalem, and his belief that America could become a new Jerusalem:

And God scattered them—
 through the cities of the Medes, besides the waters
 of Babylon;
 they fled before Him into Egypt and went down to
 the sea in ships;
 the whales swallowed them,
 the birds brought word of them to the king;
 the young men met them with weapons of war,
 the old men with proverbs—
 and God looked and saw the Hebrews
 citizens of the great cities,
 talking Hebrew in every language under the sun.¹¹

If, as this scriptural summary indicates, the Jewish diaspora was punishment for breaking God's laws, then Reznikoff's presence in America is both a sign of that past transgression and a continuation of the original punishment. The diaspora may have led to an epic of migration and adaptation that bears comparison with Homer's *Odyssey*,¹² but the homecoming of the wandering Jew had yet to be told: the punishment continued. In the context of this ambivalence towards America, Reznikoff searches for an imaginative balance between the potentialities of the land of strangers and nostalgia for the lost ideal of Jerusalem. His response is to suggest the possibility of talking 'Hebrew in every language under the sun'; of appropriating American-English and making it a Hebraic-

¹¹ Charles Reznikoff, 'LXXVII', *Jerusalem the Golden* (New York: The Objectivist Press, 1934), p. 29. Hereafter referred to as *Jerusalem*.

¹² This Homeric echo may be confirmed by comparing the line 'and went down to/ the sea in ships', with the opening line of Pound's 'Canto I', 'And then went down to the ship', *Cantos*, 3.

English. This poses a simple question: how does the Hebraic side of this coupling reveal itself in the use of American-English?

Does each language provide its speakers with a unique view of the world? Are there some things which can be thought and felt in Hebrew that cannot be felt in American-English; or are there essential pre-verbal thoughts and feelings that can be accessed and expressed through all languages? These questions are too complex to consider here in any way other than through Reznikoff's responses to them. The opening poem of *Jerusalem the Golden* provides an immediate view-point for the rest of the collection's treatment of the theme of cultural and linguistic translation:

The Hebrew of your poets, Zion,
is like oil upon a burn,
cool as oil;
after work,
the smell in the street at night
of the hedge in flower.
Like Solomon,
I have married and married the speech of strangers;
none are like you, Shulamite.
(*Jerusalem*, I, 1)

This poem in praise of Hebrew is not written in Hebrew or even in Yiddish, but in 'the speech of strangers'. Perhaps only someone who has married 'the speech of strangers' could arrange such an unguent sequence of sounds as 'oil', 'cool', and 'smell', in an approximation of the effects created by the poets of Zion. Reznikoff places the linguistic union implied in the composition of this poem in the context of Solomon's illicit marriages among the prohibited tribes, a transgressive act that led to the destruction of The Temple

in Jerusalem and the diaspora of the Jewish nation. This is the painful paradox at the heart of an ostensibly tranquil poem: the poem records and repeats Solomon's crime; it betrays the Shulamite, or speaker of the sacred language taught in the Shul, even as it sings his or her praise. Reznikoff can neither return to his lost linguistic origins nor, it initially seems, escape the nostalgia they generate. However, the poem does suggest a possible point of resolution: the three line description of reading Hebrew is mirrored by the following three lines: 'after work,/ the smell in the street at night/ of the hedge in flower'. It is as if, when used in this way, the 'speech of strangers' comes closest to achieving the soothing effects of Hebrew. Experience of the material world becomes the common ground that both languages can focus on with, perhaps, an equivalent effect. The recollection of a direct experience of the thing becomes the terminus of 'meaning' for both languages.

Is 'talking Hebrew in every language under the sun' simply then a matter of using a referential language that avoids abstraction? If so, it fits in neatly with the epic programme of naming the contents of America begun by Captain John Smith in his *General History of Virginia, New England and the Summer Isles* (1624).¹³ Reznikoff was clearly aware of this overlap between his construction of a Hebraic sensibility and the nominalistic constructions of America as a diverse catalogue of plenty, for he relinedated a passage of Captain John Smith's work in poem 'LXXIV: *The English in Virginia/ April 1607* // (*Works of Captain John Smith, edited by Edward Arber*) (*Jerusalem*, 22-24). It is also significant that Zukofsky selected this poem for inclusion in *An "Objectivists" Anthology*, as it conforms to Taupin's definition of the epic as an arrangement of facts, and

¹³ For a study of the development of the myth of America as a catalogue of plenty see, Susan Manning, 'Naming of Parts; or, The Comforts of Classification: Thomas Jefferson's Construction of America as Fact and Myth', *Journal of America Studies*, 30 (1996), 345-364.

asserts the Jewish writer's importance as a force revitalising this particularly American style.

Jerusalem the Golden contains instances in which America is offered as the source of Edenic experience. Time collapses into the moment of sense-perception, and with it shame and guilt at past transgressions:

The air is sweet, the hedge is in flower;
 at such an hour, near such water, lawn, and wood,
 the sage writing of our beginnings must have been:
 lifting his eyes from the page he chanted,
 "And God saw the earth and seas—that it was
 good."
 (*Jerusalem*, XIII, 5)

Eden and Jerusalem exist in the moment of this timeless, primal perception. However, elsewhere the moment of vision is frail, susceptible to doubt, and liable to misinterpretation:

I thought for a moment, The [sic] bush in the back yard
 has blossomed:
 it was only some of the old leaves covered with snow.
 (*Jerusalem*, XLVII, 14)

Through this moment of misseeing it becomes evident that the world is not perceived objectively, but bears the reflection of our inescapable subjectivity. How we see is altered by what we desire. If the eye can be deceived, then the interpretation of vision becomes more problematic. The poet who wants to present facts with the minimum of predatory

intention has to be wary of how such desires may interfere with empirical observation. In this poem, and in others that contain similar moments of disappointment, Reznikoff replaces the Imagist moment of temporal and spatial transcendence, with a wistful contemplation of how the radiance of desire subsides into clarity.

Reznikoff treats the possibility that America might be the materialisation of an ideal with a keen sense of irony; he is no thoughtless American patriot:

Rooted among roofs, their smoke among the clouds,
factory chimneys—our cedars of Lebanon.
(*Poetry*, 252: *Jerusalem*, XL, 12)

It is not difficult to imagine how someone could see the shape of a cedar of Lebanon in the combined shape of a factory chimney and smoke. However, once this visual association has been made, the antagonistic significance of the two components of the image begin to force the reader towards another level of interpretation. To begin with, the use of a factory chimney as a kind of axle tree, or *axis mundi* that binds heaven to earth, has surely to be ironic in the context of The Depression. If we then take ‘the cedars of Lebanon’ as a synecdoche for Jerusalem, it becomes equally difficult to bind together the idealism symbolised by the holy city with a synecdochic reading of factory chimneys, which would lead us to consider the relationship between the capitalist and the worker. Does America, the promised land, promise only exploitation? In the closing poem of *Jerusalem the Golden*, titled ‘Karl Marx’, Reznikoff offers a simplistic, idealised Communist context in which the significance of the factory chimney and its smoke might be reconciled with the ideal values of a New Jerusalem: ‘Wheels of steel and pistons of steel/ shall fetch us water

and hew us wood' (*Jerusalem*, LXXIX-4, 33).

However, the 'revolutionary' aspect of this collection does not take place in this closing summary of Marxist ideology, but in the personal struggle Reznikoff describes between perception and inherited beliefs:

The moon shines in the summer night;
 now I begin to understand the Hebrews
 who could forget the Lord, throw kisses at the
 moon,
 until the archers came against Israel
 and bronze chariots from the north
 rolled into the cities of Judah and the streets of
 Jerusalem.
 What then must happen, you Jeremiahs,
 to me who look longingly at moon and stars and
 trees?
 (*Jerusalem*, III, 2-3)

By venerating the material object Reznikoff risks joining the idolaters. He has to battle against the scriptural prohibitions of the Jeremiahs in order to allow himself the pleasure and enlightenment his perception yields. He makes it clear that it is the Jeremiahs, and not necessarily Judaism, who set the limits to knowledge and pleasure. Reznikoff offers his faith as a more flexible system of belief in which the God becomes indistinguishable from the mutable, material world. To venerate the natural, material world, is to venerate God: the two need not be at odds with each other. Reznikoff identifies this aspect of his faith in section three of poem '*LXXIX: Jerusalem the Golden*':

Spinoza

He is the stars,
 multitudinous as the drops of rain,
 and the worm at our feet,
 leaving only a blot on the stone;
 except God there is nothing.
 (*Jerusalem*, 32)

Reznikoff's development of Spinozan beliefs echoes Zukofsky's poem 'Prop. LXI' in the way that it associates God with 'multitudinous', simultaneous events. As in Zukofsky's poem, these beliefs form part of Reznikoff's justification of his emotional response to matter: such emotions, based in reason, cannot be excessive. There should be no guilt attached to love of the material world. Reznikoff's alignment with Spinoza allows him the opportunity for a lightly comic subversion of received values of beauty and worth: he compares the shape of a cat's vomit with a leaf (*Jerusalem*, XXVII, 10); he compares red warning lanterns 'About an excavation' with birds (*Jerusalem*, XXV, 9); and asks us 'not to despise the green jewel shining among the/ twigs/ because it is a traffic light' (*Jerusalem*, XLVIII, 14). If God 'neither hates nor loves' (*Jerusalem*, LXXIX-3, 32), and all things are God, then the notion of beauty becomes redundant: to pass aesthetic judgements on matter would be to assume the position of judge over God himself. But if this is the case, then one could argue that the factory chimneys are also the work of God and therefore possess equal beauty to the Cedars of Lebanon with which they are compared. Indeed this collection could best be characterised as one in which there occurs a deliberate destabilisation of the usual hierarchical categories of value we apply to things. Reznikoff matches the syntactic ambiguities present in Zukofsky's poetry with these odd

and provocative combinations. Ultimately, however, Reznikoff does not seek to extend his revolution into a new binding myth. His ‘revolution’ is a matter of consolation and survival; of seeing through preconceptions and into the small beauties that may illuminate a few moments of being:

The sun shining on the little waves of the bay, the
 little leaves of the hedge—
 with these I school myself to be content.
 (*Jerusalem*, LXVII, 20)

Jerusalem, if it exists anywhere, occurs in these moments of quiet animation and ‘connection’ with the world.

*

The title of Bunting’s poem ‘Attis: Or Something Missing’ is accompanied with the musical direction ‘*Pastorale arioso* (for male soprano)’. A number of other poems included in Zukofsky’s issue of *Poetry* and *An “Objectivists” Anthology* use the metaphors of performance and theatricality to signal either a loss of conviction or, more specifically, the collapse of idealism. As we have seen in Zukofsky’s ‘Poem Beginning “The”’, this may grant the artist the freedom to become anything within the compass of his or her improvisation skills. Liberated from the ethical obligation of expressing essential truths about the self and the world, words may be used simply as a means of augmenting the range of what can be thought. Carl Rakosi’s poem ‘A Journey Away’ contains some outlandish ‘artificial’ passages:

The words were impressive and muted.
 Suddenly the one preoccupied
 with his obsolete luetic eyeball
 made a meaningless aside
 in keeping with the serious scene.
 (OA, 47)

In the context of Taupin's definition of the epic as '*neither love nor hate but the restitution of these sentiments to a chain of facts that exist*' (OA, 29), the inclusion of a poem that associates the 'meaningless aside' 'with the serious scene' in *An "Objectivists" Anthology* may seem paradoxical. T.S. Eliot provides a precedent for Rakosi's notion of the poem as 'meaningless aside' in 'The Hollow Men': 'Our dried voices, when/ We whisper together/ Are quiet and meaningless'.¹⁴ Other poems in Zukofsky's Objectivist texts treat the 'meaninglessness' of life lived without conviction in a less comical and inventive manner. John Wheelwright's poem 'Slow Curtain', included in the 'Objectivists' issue of *Poetry*, describes the relationship between two lovers as a theatrical performance. They have fashioned the relationship they inhabit in the same way that a theatre company produces a show. They perform all the roles, back stage and on-stage, necessary for the production of a performance of love. Even so, they cannot perform the kiss that their script indicates should occur at the end of the piece:

The actors are their own audience.
 As actors, they are artists;
 but as audience, they are critics.
 They have read the play beforehand
 in order to do it justice,
 and they know the final stage directions
 are impossible.
 (Poetry, 263)

¹⁴ T.S. Eliot, *Collected Poems*, p. 89.

It is clearly possible to interpret this performance of love as a metaphor for a relationship that has lost its internal motivation and lapsed into a sequence of empty gestures choreographed by habit. The artificiality of their performance clashes with the conventional assumption that love is spontaneous, reckless, self-discovering and unifying. Love is commonly imagined to be anything but staged, or if it is 'acted' according to a code of formal courtship, those conventions are usually animated by desire. The performers in Wheelwright's poem are, it seems, cripplingly self-conscious. They play both performer and critic. While no reason is given for their inability to go through with the scripted kiss, one could supply a simple psychological narrative to the episode in which their failure to kiss symbolises a mutual recognition that their love is a sham. However, they are not capable of inventing another ending; perhaps because of their self-watchfulness, perhaps because they believe in the authority of their script too much, or maybe even because they cannot face the consequences of confronting the death of their love. They travel along the 'meaningless' lines of their script towards a dead end.

S. Theodore Hecht presents a similarly artificial and mysterious 'scene' in his poem 'Table for Christmas':

Carefully along
 The runners on the floor
 She walked:
 Reminded one
 Not a little
 Of a church aisle,
 A figure going up
 To an altar.

The little Christmas tree
 Which she moved,

The white bread which she set
 Down: so there were
 The Christmas tree,
 The white bread,
 And in each corner of the table,
 Four in all,
 Little wine bottles,
 Pink ribbons tied about their necks.
 (*Poetry*, 255)

If 'runners' are interpreted to be rails or perhaps grooves set into the floor, then does this poem describe an automaton or child? Are we being shown that the child's sense of wonder and respect for the mysterious symbols of Christmas constitutes the original impulse behind all sacramental rights? And at the same time does the observer perceive that these revered Christmas decorations and secular sacraments of 'white bread' and 'little wine bottles' are mere imitations of once meaningful symbols? In the context of the political and economic situation of the early 1930s, it could be that Hecht's poem compares the mesmerising effects of commodity fetishism and religious fetishism. Whatever interpretation is made, the sense that the child has no control over her action, that she moves along runners on the floor, must be incorporated. The poem itself feels perfunctory, as if gliding inanely along the lines of dutiful description. However there are fissures in its presentation of reality. Its tendency to overstate may be an indication of its parodic design. There is an easy vacuity to the phrase 'reminded one/ not a little'; and the lines 'And in each corner of the table,/Four in all' feel tautological. Could this be a parody of an Amygistic poem. The poem has a disquieting air of inanity, as if it were made to test our boredom in order to see if we, the readers, can get off the 'runners' of looking for intention and spot its deliberate and un-profound 'emptiness'.

By awakening our sense that their poems ‘contain’ neither identifiable emotion nor intention, Hecht and Wheelwright assert the ‘verbal existence’ of their poems. They are riddles; and as with all riddles, the answer, should one exist, can only be found by a close study of the clues. The first poem in Carl Rakosi’s sequence ‘Before You’, titled ‘Orphean Lost’, which opens the ‘Objectivists’ edition of *Poetry*, also obscures the identity of its referents. In addition, it participates in the themes of dislocation, exile and nostalgia identified in other writing associated with the Objectivist configuration. Rakosi’s sets his poem in the serious scenery of the Orphic myth:

ORPHEAN LOST

The oakboughs of the cottagers
 descend, my lover,
 with the bestial evening.
 The shadows of their swelled trunks
 crush the frugal herb.
 The heights lag
 and perish in a blue vacuum.

And I, my lover,
 skirt the cottages,
 the eternal hearths and gloom,
 to animate the ideal
 with internal passion.
 (*Poetry*, 237)

The title of this poem leaves the precise identity of the poem’s persona uncertain. Are these words spoken by Orpheus, or by a follower of Orpheus (an ‘Orphean’)? ‘Orphean’ is also a near homophone of ‘orphan’, which, if audible, doubles the sense of loss this poem plays with. According to Ovid, ‘oakboughs’ formed part of the grove that crowded around Orpheus as he lamented and complained of the loss of Eurydice. Is this then a

follower of Orpheus imagining the shadows of the trees of a latter-day village to be re-enacting the original arboreal enchantment? Ultimately, it is the reader who is left at a loss by this nearly familiar literary landscape. Yet while the identity of the speaker may be uncertain, the poem signals its subject's state of mind. The description of the evening as 'bestial', shadows as 'crush[ing]', herbs as 'frugal', and heights as 'perish[ing]', suggests either the modifying colours of an imagination in the throes of despair, or an idealist dramatising a conflict between the perfection of 'internal passion' and the bestiality of the material world. A plausible reading of this curious poem may be derived from the Orphean's inability to share his ideal with the 'cottagers'. The ideal has shrunk to a private fantasy threatened and obscured by surrounding matter.

That Rakosi may be ridiculing the isolated idealist is perhaps confirmed by the third section of 'A Journey Away' included in *An "Objectivists" Anthology*:

An ideal
like a canary
singing in the dark
for appleseed and barley.

Something from the laurel,
a tiny arsis.
(*OA*, 49)

If 'laurel' is read as a metonym for the laureate adorned poet, then the acclaimed poet and 'descendent' of Orpheus can, according to Rakosi, only manage a 'tiny', isolate stressed syllable or 'arsis'. The laurels in question could belong to Eliot: '*This is the way the world*

*ends/ Not with a bang but a whimper.*¹⁵ The option to read ‘Orphean Lost’ as a satire on those perceived to pursue the private passion of self-transcendence through art, rather than using their art to alter perceptions of the material world, is further enhanced by the poems that follow in the poem sequence ‘Before You’. Its second poem, ‘Fluteplayers from Finmarken’, focuses on the topoi of the sea-quest, and echoes the failed or unresolved symbolic quests of Melville and Poe. The persona of the poem declares, ‘It was not clear what I was after’ (*Poetry*, 239). In the next poem in the sequence, ‘Unswerving Marine’, he underlines his exiled, orphaned status: ‘there is no port’ (*Poetry*, 239). Unlike Eliot’s persona in ‘Marina’, Rakosi’s seafarer lacks the pole star of faith and credible intuition. He is lost in the world with no whale, glimmering city, or promised land to pursue. Lacking an external goal, Rakosi plays ironically with the idea of psychological predestination:

It seemed ordained then that
 my feet slip on the seal bones
 and my head come down suddenly
 over a simple rock-cistvaen,
 grief-stricken and archwise.
 Thereon were stamped
 the figures of the noble women
 I had followed with my closed eyes
 out to the central blubber
 of the waters.
 (*Poetry*, 238)

How could the speaker have journeyed to sea with his eyes closed? Any notion of this as a realistic account disappears as the narrative slips unaccountably from one incident to the

¹⁵ T.S. Eliot, ‘The Hollow Men’, *Collected Poems*, p. 92.

next. The narrator could be describing a dream. In this case the underlying motivation for the journey might be arrived at through an analysis of the dream logic that dictates its shape. The ordaining force could be a repressed desire that leads the dreamer towards its sublimation in the form of dream image: decipher the hieroglyphic symbols on the 'rock-cistvaen', or stone tomb and the puzzle may be solved. As he slips on bone, and the figures are female and 'stamped' on a womb/tomb, the journey could symbolise a form of death-drive, although this is far from obvious. Indeed, the rhythms, language and images Rakosi uses for this encounter bring with them a certain levity that disturbs this interpretation. Can figures be 'stamped' on rock? Is this a spoof, perhaps parodying the journey towards the disclosure of intimations found in Eliot's seafaring poem? Is a mono-maniacal quest for consistency, causation and explanation being tricked out of us only to be made to seem ridiculous before being denied? Incongruous descriptions like 'grief-stricken and archwise' push the reader away from the dream imagery and back to the language. Is this 'archwise', as in the body of the speaker occupies the shape of an arch; or 'archwise', as in that his fall and grief have granted him arch-wisdom? How can one be both in a state of grief and spanning a rock tomb with one's body? Both readings haunt each other with comical intent. The closing lines of this strophe, 'the central blubber/ of the waters', at once links us back to the seal bones, perhaps suggests the argot of the professional sealer, and at the same time also undermines both the symbolic portent of the bones and the character of the speaker. The whole poem seems 'arch', as it shifts ambiguously between 'an important manner' and parody. It is a deliberate enigma, another example of an indecipherable American hieroglyph. But this time there is no hope that the hieroglyph may contain the significance of a transcendent force. This is the hieroglyph as a joke, as part of the fraud that keeps the individual in pursuit of a mystical destination. A reader

familiar with the use of ellipsis and juxtaposition in *The Waste Land*, prepared for detective work, can discover none of the coherent psychological, mythological and cultural narratives that connect the fragments of Eliot's poem. The symbols, like those carved in a chasm in Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*, remain undecipherable and multivalent.

Freed from the need to elucidate a transcendental goal, Rakosi revels in the fictional operations a text can perform. In the third poem of the sequence 'Unswerving Marine', the 'old seaman' who 'paces the plank again' (*Poetry*, 239) at the beginning of the poem is cancelled out at the end:

And the wind
 and the mind sustain her
and there is really
 no step upon the gangway,
 nothing but the saltdeposits
of the open.
 (*Poetry*, 240)

'Unswerving Marine' encourages the reader to understand that he or she 'sustains' the meaning of the poem during the process of reading: there is no life or presence behind it for us to discover. As Zukofsky put it in a contemporaneous poem: 'no one is in in No One Inn'.¹⁶ The sudden erasure of the 'old seaman' shatters any notion that this is a realistic description. However, after he is cancelled out, we are left with another textual veil. This one has 'nothing but the saltdeposits/ of the open' printed upon it. We appear to have hit

¹⁶ Louis Zukofsky, 'No One Inn', *Complete Short Poetry*, p. 57.

waking reality and the solid ground of the referent. And yet the arch word ‘really’ hovers over this gesture towards reality, hinting that the conception of emptiness might not be as empty as emptiness itself; that the act of naming, as in Wallace Stevens’s poem ‘The Snow Man’,¹⁷ defines the presence of the namer. No matter how un-predatory the use of the word, it cannot achieve the disappearance of the self into the objective presence of the thing.

Where Hecht’s and Wheelwright’s poems seem oppressed, or at least inhibited, by the epistemological and aesthetic uncertainty they describe, Rakosi uses the freedom of uncertainty to play, inventively and subversively, with language. The work of these three poets describes one form of response to the uncertainty that everywhere pervades *An “Objectivists” Anthology* and Zukofsky’s issue of *Poetry*. They identify and play with the problems of lost authority but do not, beyond Rakosi’s simple and profound assertion ‘is not every man/ his own host’ (*Poetry*, 241), reconstruct an ethical system that avoids the essentialist pitfalls of the idealist. The difficulty, as we shall go on to see in a more extended examination of Zukofsky’s “‘A’1-7”, lies in the problem of negotiating the paradoxes of provisional authority and truthful performance.

¹⁷ Wallace Stevens, ‘The Snow Man’, *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1954, rpt., 1990), pp. 9-10.

CHAPTER 4

ALL TOGETHER NOW

Louis Zukofsky first published “‘A’1-7” in the ‘epic’ section of *An “Objectivists” Anthology*. He then revised it for publication in 1959 in “‘A’1-12,”¹ the version reprinted in the University of California Press edition of the complete “‘A’”. In making those revisions Zukofsky either simplified or cut a number of passages that demonstrated the more extreme examples of his ‘fugal’ technique of poetic composition. While the alterations constitute a matter of minutes rather than degrees, in general they make the ‘finite word’ of Zukofsky’s particular linguistic ‘revolution’ more ‘finite’ by situating it in more stable, if still elaborate, contexts. This increased control over the signifying potential of the word lessens the connection between the sequence and its historical origin in the ‘Revolution of the Word’; an unfortunate separation, as the poem, even in its revised form, shows signs of a tempered engagement with the linguistic freedoms of the period. This passage typifies the material Zukofsky cut:

And palestra : Youths—
 A wheel—women, trainmen —a wheel,
 Felly, marble-blue, chisel-wedge, iron spoke,
 Miner’s legs,
 Mill-oatmeal (that is how
 Music first came into our family),
 Ricky Cœur de Lion, carousel horse ;
 (OA, 129)

Out of context this seems no more than a list of words and phrase fragments arranged to create a musical shape. In context, this passage operates, to use the metaphor offered, as a ‘palestra’, or public wrestling place, in which the different themes metonymically

¹ Louis Zukofsky, “‘A’1-12 (Kyoto, Japan: Origin Press, 1959). For a particular description of the publication history of “‘A’1-7” see Marcella Booth, *A Catalogue of the Louis Zukofsky Manuscript Collection* (Austin, Texas: Humanities Research Center at The Univ. of Texas at Austin, 1975).

represented by these words, tangle and struggle. Heard in rapid succession, the reader familiar with the context in which this excerpt operates may slide swiftly between themes. This passage is typical of Zukofsky's structural embodiment of the metaphor of fugal poetic composition. Ellipsis and juxtaposition operate as 'tropes' for the simultaneous performance of voice:

Against obvious transitions, Pound, Williams, Rakosi, Bunting, Miss Moore, oppose condensation. The transitions cut are implicit in the work, 3 or 4 things occur at a time making the difference between Aristotelian expansive unities and the concentrated locus which is the mind acting creatively upon the facts.

"Recencies" ? No more than a Shakespearian conceit which manages to carry at least two ideas at a time. Or Dante's literal, anagogical and theological threefold meaning referred to in a letter to Can Grande.
(*OA*, 22)

But is it really possible to have a sense of the diachronic operation of each metonym as it occurs in the synchronic process of reading through the line? In theory it must be, for I am quite able to read the index of a book and consider swiftly the subjects to which each entry leads. In practice it is hard to know if an instantaneous dialogue between these voices can be experienced, and if so, how such a curious sensation might be described. In this chapter I am going to provide a close reading of "'A"1-7'. This, rather than a thematic approach, is justifiable on the grounds that in order to be able to identify the meaning of any one theme in the poem, it is necessary to have an understanding of the others that accompany and modify the range of its significance.

While Zukofsky's rapid recapitulation of material may sound strange and unidiomatic, it does not scale the heights of verbal oddity Eugene Jolas reaches in

‘Mountain Words’:

mira ool dara frim
oasta grala drima
os tristomeen²

Some phonemes in this stanza may be familiar, such as ‘os’, the Latin for bone, but many are not. However, even if they could be returned to the languages from which they were taken (assuming for the moment that they do indeed come from other languages), it would require an immense effort of scholarship and listening concentration to understand their current combinations. Such conscious effort would defeat the purpose of the poem. Speaking this stanza out loud reminds me of the fantastical foreign languages I made up as a child; languages that would produce feelings of self-estrangement and unfamiliarity, as if I had suddenly become a foreign visitor in the school-yard— this may have been Jolas’ intention. Without the guidance of accepted usage each speaker can intend these strange mouthings in any way they wish, and may respond with vastly different emotions to the physical act of speaking them. This is unsurprising, as Jolas had designed these sound arrangements to free the reader from the ‘hegemony of the banal word’. The great draw-back inevitable to his claim that this speech might enable the speaker to enter a state of collective being was that, with a linguistic community of only one, the experience liberated could not be corroborated without recourse to the ‘hegemony’ of common speech. Jolas’ ‘speech’ is tantamount to a private language, which is to say, not a language at all.

² Eugene Jolas, ‘Mountain Words’, quoted in Cary Nelson, *Repression and Recovery: Modern American Poetry and the Politics of Cultural Memory, 1910-1945* (Madison, Wisconsin and London: The Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1989), p. 131.

The way in which it shadows the stanza form and gestures towards the rhythms and musical shapes of poetry may allow it to become the carrier of private emotions, but it cannot engage publicly and precisely with the ideological structures of political and economic oppression embodied in the banal words it seeks to subvert. At best, Jolas provides a sense of personal liberation.

In “‘A’13’ (1960), Zukofsky explained:

I’ll tell you.
About my *poetics*—

music

speech

An integral
Lower limit speech
Upper limit music
(“A”, 138)

While Zukofsky’s musical arrangements may contain distortions of idiomatic syntax, word is still related to word in a way that sensitively foregrounds and uses the conventions of common usage. He makes no musical design that does not also provide a relatively controlled semiotic experience. In other words, he does not slip into the vocal ‘music’ that Jolas uses as a substitute for language. Zukofsky sketched out the properties of the word that allowed him to explore these limits:

One is brought back to the entirety of the single word which is in itself a relation, an implied metaphor, an arrangement and a harmony.
(*Poetry*, 279)

The notion of ‘the single word’ ‘as a relation’ suggests two things: firstly that the word relates us *to* something—in the context of Zukofsky’s loosely ‘nominalist’ aesthetic one can assume that it should relate us to a material thing—; and secondly, that the word’s significance depends on its relation to the linguistic context in which it is used. The relationship created between word and thing, as has been pointed out previously, is metaphorical; in other words, it is a product of language and the way it is used. Zukofsky’s description of the word as an ‘arrangement’ requires the context of his statement on words in ‘Sincerity and Objectification’ for specific elucidation. In that essay he writes, ‘each word in itself is an arrangement, it may be said that each word possesses objectification to a powerful degree’ (*Poetry*, 274), that is, it resolves ‘ideation into [musical] structure’ (*Poetry*, 274). Each word combines in its sound all the uses to which it has been put in the past and the present; each is a record of changing ideas and needs. Handle one with the consideration that an ancient and still vital object deserves, and your mind will experience the ‘objectively perfect, / Inextricably the direction of historic and contemporary particulars’ (*OA*, 136). Zukofsky considered that the collective inability to wonder over the individual word was a sign of his culture’s ‘degradation’ (*Poetry*, 274).

The planned dimensions of “A” made it suitable for the exploration of the limits of speech and music. In a letter dated 12 December 1928, Zukofsky confided to Pound that “A” was to have twenty-four movements,³ and that it would form the core of his ‘life-work’ (*P/Z*, 78). This subtle alteration of the more common phrase ‘life’s work’ is

³ Cid Corman suggests that Zukofsky’s choice of twenty-four movements echoes the twenty-four fugues that comprise J.S. Bach’s ‘Well Tempered Keyboard’. Cid Corman, ‘The Z Gambit’, *Origin: Fifth Series*, 2 (1983), p. 71.

significant. It suggests Zukofsky considered that the act of writing “A” would both shape his way of living in the world and, in turn, register the pressures of living in that world. In other words, he conceived of poetic composition as a conceptual tool that would enable him to work at living: ‘experience perfecting activity of existence’ (*OA*, 15). Zukofsky supplies a utopian teleology to this on-going process: for if there is to be the possibility of ‘perfecting’, there has to be a notion of perfection towards which experience is progressively tending. This interest in recycling past notations of experience and using them to contextualise and elucidate the present—as well as subjecting them to the test of current validity—may have been one reason why Zukofsky took Bach’s *Matthew Passion* as the ‘model’ for the composition of “A”¹⁻⁷. The opening chorale of the *Matthew Passion* has been described as ‘a kind of microcosm of the musical and religious universe that will infuse the whole narrative unfolding of the Passion with its vocal processes’.⁴ From the first chorale onwards the music develops through a concatenation of recycled and evolving material, making it an apt metaphor for Zukofsky’s compositional technique. In the blurb for the 1978 one-volume edition of “A” Zukofsky described his imperative concern as a poet: ‘the story must exist in each word or it cannot go on.’⁵

Zukofsky’s belief in the word as ‘a relation’, and that the meaning of any one part of “A” depends for its full significance on every other part, has an important philosophical and ethical implication. If this is so, then as language users we depend on *our* relation to

⁴ Jean Luc Bourgeois, ‘The Origins of Bach’s St. Matthew Passion’, in notes accompanying Johann Sebastian Bach, *Matthäus-Passion BWV 244*, conducted by Michel Corboz (Paris France: Erato, Num 750553, 1983), p. 13.

⁵ Quoted in Peter Quartermain, “Only Is Order Othered. Nought Is Nulled”, *ELH*, 54 (1987), p. 958.

the historical and contemporary use of that language for the meaning of our existence. Outside that community of speech we have no meaning. An awareness of this is built into one of the structural metaphors of “‘A’1-7’:

And the double chorus singing,
The song out of the voices.
(*OA*, 120)

In the final version of the *Matthew Passion*, Bach gave directions in the score for the musicians to be divided into two separate choirs, orchestras and continuo groups. When Bach organised its performance in 1736, these divisions were further enhanced by his siting of the separate groups on either side of the audience. As a consequence the complete effect of the music was not heard among the musicians but in the central space occupied by the audience.⁶ It was this compositional technique and process of reception that Zukofsky sought to emulate and stimulate in “‘A’1-7’. Writing to the poet Lorine Niedecker in 1935 Zukofsky explained: ‘it must be music of the statements, but not explanations ever, that’s why I seem to leave out - but [the] reader will have to learn to read statement, juxtaposed constructs, as music.’⁷

“‘A’1’ begins with a reference to the fiddle fugue that introduces the opening chorale of the *Matthew Passion*: ‘A /Round of fiddles playing Bach—’ (*OA*, 112). The

⁶ Jean-Luc Bourgeois, op. cit., p. 11.

⁷ Louis Zukofsky, ‘Letter to Lorine Niedecker dated November 9, 1935’, quoted in Barry Ahearn, *Zukofsky’s “A”: An Introduction* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: Univ. California Press, 1983), pp. 75-76.

isolation of the indefinite article and title of the poem from the noun it qualifies renders the meaning of the connection momentarily ambiguous: is 'A' a 'Round' poem; or will it send us 'A/ Round' in circles on a verbal journey approximate to the recycled melodies of the fiddles? Both these readings are available; but perhaps of greater significance in the context of Zukofsky's epic aspirations is that the indefinite article makes the particular object generic. In other words, the title and emphatic first word of poem signals an interest in common experiences. Zukofsky later wrote: 'a case can be made out for the poet giving some of his life to the use of the words *the* and *a* : both of which are weighted with as much epos and historical destiny as one man can perhaps resolve' (*Prepositions*, 18).

The first quotations from the *Matthew Passion* to appear in "'A"1' are taken from the opening Chorale in which The Daughters of Israel lament the death of their 'betroted'. Christ's body lies broken and bleeding. As in Bunting's 'Attis: Or Something missing' the fertility god has been dismembered, but in the form of the *Matthew Passion* Zukofsky has a structure capable of contextualising this temporary impotence within an intensely meaningful and exquisitely ordered cycle of death and regeneration. Even as Bach's music reaches the depths of despair it does so through melodies that, in their statement and return, provide an artistic paradigm for the recurrence of matter and energy. Zukofsky clearly does not believe in the metaphysical, other-worldly rewards of the Christian faith, but in Christianity as yet another embodiment of the archetypal solar and hydraulic religions that allowed communities to participate conceptually in the renewal of the material world. As has already been noted, Zukofsky considered the authority of these binding religions to make them suitable analogues for the new communistic social religion he felt himself duty bound to construct. He was not alone in desiring an organic, social 'religion'. In 1927,

John Dewey (an important figure at Columbia University during Zukofsky's attendance) published a travelogue titled *Impressions of Soviet Russia* in which he expressed his belief that Communist Russia offered its intellectuals 'a unified religious social faith' bringing with it a 'simplification and integration of life'. Enviously, they were 'organic members of an organic [sic] going movement'.⁸

Echoing the 'narrative' allusion to the dismembered fertility god Zukofsky presents the human body in "'A"1' through a series of cinematic close-up shots: 'bare arms, black dresses'; 'blue tendons bleeding'; 'cheeks'; 'eyes longing'; 'Lips looking out of a beard/ Hips looking out of ripped trousers'; 'Feet stopping'; 'turned necks'; 'Foreheads wrinkled' (*OA*, 112-117). Zukofsky deconstructs the deluded belief of the naïve realist that the object can be beheld in its entirety; that what we see is unaffected by how we see. Zukofsky's shifting camera-eye reveals the process of perception to be made up of a stream of sense-data shaped by the changing spatial and temporal relationship between viewer and viewed. However, if the broken body of Christ and the shattered object form one continuous metaphor we should not expect a resurrection of the Newtonian conception of time and space. Even when the dialectical struggle finally brings itself and history to a close, one will not 'get, see,/ more than particulars' (*OA*, 140). Despite the threat of epistemological uncertainty created by this reduction of the object to a phenomenon, Zukofsky indicates that fragments of perception and information, or 'luminous details' as Pound termed them, may be so arranged as to stimulate a conception of the principle implied in their relations. The writer does not presume to explain the significance of the object but offers it, along

⁸ Peter G. Filene, *Americans and the Soviet Experience, 1917-1933*, p. 152.

with others, in order to guide the construction of a provisional interpretation within a certain self-evident range of possibilities. Later, in “‘A’”8’ Zukofsky was to become more explicit about the level of control that the details or facts of these arrangements were to have over possible interpretations:

The facts are not strange to each other.
 When they drive, your choice
 Cannot but be guided by simplicity.
 (“A”, 47)

To allow too much latitude for interpretation might lead to uncertainty and inaction as in the case of Henry Adams:

Nothing to say.
 For him, all opinion founded on fact must be error,
 Because the facts can never be complete,
 And their relations must always be infinite.
 (“A”, 82)

So Zukofsky places his faith in the ‘finite’, precise significance of the fact. Once the facts are determined the dialogue that occurs between them will determine the path of action. In other words, thought tested against the evidence of matter will dictate the ‘natural’ ethical course of action. Zukofsky saw this reflected in Pound’s *Cantos*:

At intervals his presence occurs more in the manner of a judgment: yet one naturally apprehends an identification of the revenge of his choros nympharum with the intricacy of the renewal of matter, rather than with the

determinism of the theologian's geometry.⁹

The opening strophe of “‘A’1’ provides a good example of Zukofsky's adaptation of Pound's notion of the ideogram. Christ's tortured body is juxtaposed with the ‘bediamond’ ‘black dresses’ of the audience; a contrast that encourages us to consider the stark distinction between the poverty of Christ and the wealth of the audience. From this we might deduce that the sacred ‘theatre’ of *The Passion* has, on the 5 April 1928, become a theatrical performance of conspicuous waste. Zukofsky then makes the black evening dress of the audience a sign of the ethical decadence of the twentieth century; a sartorial signifier he contrasts with the vital ‘motley’ of the ‘Country people of Leipzig’ (*OA*, 112). His verse music scores this pattern of distinctions. Arrangements of hard-stressed plosive consonants in a sprung-rhythm gives the first strophe concerned with describing the performance an earthy, dancing energy: ‘Starched, heaving, / Belly freighted—boom!’ (*OA*, 112-113). There are no more than two weak syllables in succession in Zukofsky's more-or-less four-beat line, thus avoiding any dissipation of the energy created by the strong stresses. This heightened rhythmicity ends with the strophe as Zukofsky shifts into the flat rhythms of a kind of prose inscription that seems to lay the performance to rest in the darkness and disorder of the late 'twenties. The first sounds heard by Zukofsky after the performance ends are the ‘autos honking’ (*OA*, 113). The sound of concerted order and effortless process has given way to the sound of congested, disorderly, private desires. For Zukofsky, the car was no longer an image of progressive modernity. In 1920 there were 7.5 million cars on the road; by 1930 there were 26.5 million—one car for every five

⁹ Louis Zukofsky, ‘The Cantos of Ezra Pound’, *The Criterion*, X (1931), p. 429.

Americans.¹⁰ In the course of “‘A’1-7’ the car becomes one of Zukofsky’s key metonyms for the misdirection of productive energy in contemporary America.

After this prose epitaph: ‘The lights dim, and the brain when the flesh dims.’ (*OA*, 113) ‘Zukofsky’, now a named figure in his own poem, is plunged into darkness. In this dual dimming of flesh and brain Zukofsky emphasises the materiality of the intelligence, a point repeated in “‘A’2’, where Zukofsky makes visual perception indivisible from the external matter perceived: ‘Green leathery leaf within leathery vision—’ (*OA*, 119). It is significant that in both these instances Zukofsky places matter before mind, reversing the idealist order of form and matter, and asserting a belief that the phenomenon has a material objective existence. In “‘A’8’ Zukofsky was again more explicit about the relationship he conceived to exist between thought and matter: ‘Unbodily substance is an absurdity/ like unbodily body. It is impossible/ to separate thought and matter that thinks.’ (“‘A’”, 46) This implies that even if we cannot become the thing-in-itself, we are still inextricable from matter as we perceive its existence. However, the scientific interpretation of facts does not always hold sole sway in “‘A’1-7’. Zukofsky uses the play of light and dark to repeat the age old trope that light is an emblem of goodness, and darkness of evil. In the post-performance darkness the poem shifts into a surrealist mode, as if, with the withdrawal of the intellectual light of the performance and the material house-lights ‘Zukofsky’ becomes prey to irrational fears. He enters a momentary hell of self-doubt in which the theatre usher transforms into Satan and tries to taint the sense of Arcadian vitality that he has ‘harbored’ during the performance. Satan does so by pointing out that

¹⁰ Sean Dennis Cashman, *America in the Twenties and Thirties: The Olympian Age of Franklin Delano Roosevelt* (New York and London: New York Univ. Press, 1989), p. 8.

the choristers who have just performed in the angelic choir are made of flesh and blood: ‘If seen near the ocean, stripped white skins, red/ coat of the sunburn—’ (*OA*, 114). However, this approach is doomed to failure for ‘Zukofsky’, a Spinozan at heart, believes that matter and God (should he exist) are indivisible. Satan also misreads ‘Zukofsky’s’ desire: for ‘Zukofsky’ does not seek to ‘graft’ (*OA*, 113) the perfection of the music to himself, should that even be possible, but to let it and all other events arrive and leave according to the natural process of matter. Here Zukofsky presents a straight battle between aesthetic and ethical idealism, and the satanic desire for ownership. This is the first ‘temptation’ to despair that afflicts Zukofsky. The second is more problematic.

As Zukofsky asserts his faith in the aesthetic perfection of the *Matthew Passion* Satan fades into cigarette smoke. Out of that smoke, Cheshire cat-like, a tramp appears close to the exit of the concert hall. His apparition creates a Marxist ‘Image’ of the extreme consequences of the capitalist system: for every man that becomes rich enough to fund one of the ‘business temples erected to/ arts and letters’ (*OA*, 115) many others will fail, and, without the safety net of a welfare system, may end up on the streets. Zukofsky provides his aesthetic experience with an economic price tag. Can Bach’s music, and by extension the other arts, survive the context of Zukofsky’s markedly bourgeois concert-hall, or are they now reduced to signifying the mystical potency of the economic system capable of financing their production and engineering their reception? Are the aesthetic effects of Bach a means of intoxicating and pacifying revolutionary desires? Zukofsky initially asserts that art can escape its context; he states, “‘I have harboured perfection’” (*OA*, 114). However, the question of how he can justify the importance of his experience in the context of the “‘miners again on the lockout’” and in need of ‘relief’ is the problem

he sets out to solve (*OA*, 115).

The memory of the music continues to affect ‘Zukofsky’ after the performance:

A thousand fiddles as beyond effort
 Playing—playing
 Into fields and forgetting to die,
 The streets smoothed over as fields,
 Not even the friction of wheels,
 Feet off ground :
 (*OA*, 115-116)

None of the energy put into this system leaks out in the form of friction. Later, in “‘A’6”, Zukofsky makes a connection between this description of Bach’s music as a perfectly efficient system of circulation and:

Natura Naturans—
 Nature as creator,
 Natura Naturata—
 Nature as created

He who creates
 Is a mode of these inertial systems—
 (*OA*, 134)

An ‘inertial system’ is defined by the OED as: ‘(a) *Physics* an inertial frame of reference; (b) a system for carrying out inertial guidance’; and ‘inertial’ is defined by the OED as ‘2 *Physics*. Designating a frame of reference in which bodies continue at rest or in uniform motion unless acted on by a force.’ In other words, Zukofsky states that in the act of creation the intellect participates in the physical laws that govern the movement of matter

in the universe. If, as is the case in Zukofsky's description of Bach's composition, perfection is a form of frictionless system, then all forces that impede the process of energy are, by implication, an unnatural obstruction. Unlike the autos honking outside the concert hall, this music glides forward without even touching the ground. An interest in Bach's composition therefore becomes justifiable to the Marxist on the grounds that it provides a metaphorical example of a perfect system of production and consumption. The economic analogue Zukofsky provides for this perfect 'inertial system' is Communism: a system in which the results of production are either invested or evenly distributed for the maximum benefit of all—none of the energy is syphoned off and congealed into private capital.

After this memory of the music 'Zukofsky' is 'Not boiling to put pen to paper' (*OA*, 116). Paradoxically, considering that the poem exists, 'Zukofsky' implies that it is enough to have had the experience; he feels no need to represent it to himself. Later this idea of the sufficiency of experience is recapitulated, creating a continuum between the aesthetic revolutions of Bach's rational music and the logical necessity of political revolution in a climate of unnatural economic inertia:

"It is more pleasant and more useful",
Said Vladimir Ilytch [sic],
"To live thru the experience
Of a revolution
Than to write about it."
(*OA*, 143)

The section of verse concerned with the day of the performance climaxes in a recapitulation of the preceding theme, with this additional material:

The trainmen the most wide awake
 “*Weary, broken bodies,*” calling
 Station on station, under the earth
 A thousand fiddles as beyond—
 “*Cold stone above thy head—*”
 Trainmen chanting
 And again :
 “*He came and found them—*
 Sleeping, indeed their eyes were
 full of sleep”.
 Good night . . .
 (OA, 116)

The pun on stations of the cross and stations on the subway, coupled with the juxtaposition of trainmen and the broken body of Christ, suggests that they are being offered as examples of the suffering proletariat awaiting the return of the natural order represented by the energy of the fiddles. Dashes at the end of each theme-fragment work as part of a typographical trope indicating the continuation of a thematic voice as it gives way to the print of another. Within the monolinear process of reading this convention works as a metaphor for the experience of the fugue’s simultaneous voices.

The symbols of castration and burial accumulate:

Worm eating bark of the street tree,
 Smoke sooting skyscraper chimneys,
 That which has been looking for substitutes, tired,
 Ready to give up the ghost in a cellar.

Remembering what ?
 Love, in your lap, in a taxi, unwilling—
 A country of state roads and automobiles,
 But the greatest number idle, shiftless, disguised on streets
 (OA, 117)

Zukofsky shifts curiously between natural decay, industrial filth, a failure of will, and a moment of erotic failure, as if each of these areas of matter were related. If we read ‘in your lap’ in the context of the Elizabethan euphemism for orgasm ‘died in your lap’, then this seems to be a description of failed love-making in, significantly, the back of a car. This impotence is contrasted starkly by the opening image of the prolific “Johann Sebastian ! (twenty-two/ children !)” (OA, 113). If erotic energy is contingent upon economic energy, as it appears to be in this instance, does this therefore mean that Bach lived in a natural, organic economy? As Zukofsky wants us to read into the relations between voices, and wants us to carry a sense of historical context with us as we read, he is courting this kind of objection. Perhaps it was enough that Bach composed and performed his music for a local community.

Zukofsky closes “A”1’ by shifting focus back to matters of economic injustice:

The excuse of the experts
 ‘Production exceeds demand so we curtail employment,’
 And the Wobblies hollering reply,
 Yeah! but why don’t you give us more than a meal
 to increase the consumption !
 While the great Magnus, before his confrere in industry,
 Swallow tail, eating a sandwich,
 “Road map to the stomach,” grinning,
 To a chart pointing, and between bites.
 (OA, 117)

The line, ‘Swallow tail, eating a sandwich’, is typical Zukofsky. The metonym for evening-dress (‘Swallow tail’) flickers into a pun in the context of his eating, suggests his ability to migrate, and underlines the message that the class who wear evening dress

consume the most. The ‘great Magnus’ is the friction in the system of production and consumption that has finally brought exchange to a halt. Food travels freely to his stomach following the road map of business organisation, while others subsist, ‘tired’ and ‘idle’ ready to ‘give up the ghost in a cellar’. The poem achieves its didactic effect through dialectical contrast. However, the ‘Wobblies’ demands were not un-problematic. They were to be answered by the implementation of Roosevelt’s New Deal. In “‘A’6’ Zukofsky describes this pacification through the opportunity to own such ‘luxury’ commodities as ‘a bath tub’ as the ‘short change of labour’ (*OA*, 137).¹¹ “‘A’1’ closes with a quote taken from the double chorus ‘Aria’ that describes the betrayal and binding of Christ:

*“Ye lightnings, ye thunders
In clouds are ye vanished.
Open, O fierce flaming pit !”
(OA, 117)*

It is no accident that Magnus has just been shown gloating over his management of ‘chain gangs’ (*OA*, 117): the king of capital plays Judas in Zukofsky’s proletarian passion.

*

The clear music—
Zoo-zoo-kaw-kaw-of-the-sky,
Not mentioning names, says Kay,
Poetry is not made of such things,
Old music, itch according to its wonts,

¹¹ ‘By frightening the ruling class into conceding the reforms and appealing to workers to vote as a solid bloc, Roosevelt simultaneously intensified class consciousness and stripped it of its radical potential.’ Melvyn Dubofsky, “Not So ‘Turbulent Years’: Another Look at the American 1930s’ *Amerika Studies - America Studies* 71, (1984). Quoted in Cashman, op. cit., 243.

Snapped old cat-guts from Johann Sebastian,
Society, traduction twice over.
(*OA*, 118)

“‘A’2’ opens with a reconsideration of the relationship between the musical and denotative properties of the word: can it be both a clear sounding note and a clear lens? Is the painting a flat surface or a three dimensional space? Kay, Zukofsky’s critical double in “‘A’1-7’, parodies his exploration of the material properties of the sign. He goes to the extreme limit, dismembering Zukofsky’s name into a series of sounds. Through the exaggeration of its component syllables other words appear, accompanied by their material referents, and Zukofsky the man becomes hidden. The ‘finite’ word has been expanded into random words that can be combined to produce a potentially infinite number of interpretations. Verbal music of this kind, similar to that composed by Jolas, obscures rather than clarifies the object.¹² As we have already seen, Zukofsky was not interested in complete indeterminacy of meaning, but in the careful construction of contexts that would delimit the significance of a passage to a determinable range. Kay also ridicules the organic social harmony for which Zukofsky’s clear, fugal verse music acts as a metaphor. Society is ‘traduction twice over’. He does not specify how or why it traduces, but in the context of the Magnus’s hell-fire nature, Kay’s objections may be founded on the belief that society deprives the community of the ‘evolutionary’ benefits of self-interest and competition.

Zukofsky answers Kay’s objections to society with the observation: ‘Wherever

¹² Bob Perelman provides an excellent alternative reading of this passage, but makes the mistake, I believe, of attributing it to ‘Zukofsky’ rather than ‘Kay’. ‘Zukofsky’s phrase is the energetic but horrible noise of his name, ethnicity, and class, self-deformed: his subjectivity objectified in the bad sense - a stuttering crow.’ See Bob Perelman, *The Trouble with Genius*, pp. 192-192.

always we are/ Crowds the sea in upon us.' (*OA*, 118) As it is recycled in various contexts during "'A"1-7', 'the sea' becomes an increasingly complex emblem. Burton Hatlen states with undue certainty that: 'The sea here is history'.¹³ It may also operate as an image for the deluge of unorganised information we encounter in the process of perception. In Zukofsky's poem the sea is a Dionysian force that threatens the boundaries of individuation with the possibility of destruction and transformation. There follows a 'Churning of old religions, epos' (*OA*, 118); a disintegration of the Apollonian epic mode.¹⁴ This results in an inundation of initially baffling textual fragments. On closer consideration, these fit into the poem's narrative strand concerned with predatory desire. The 'Ball of Imperialism' is surely a periphrastic description of an orb; a symbol that dangerously legitimates human desire with divine authority. All that follows describes the means and effects that proceed from such authority. In what sense is this a reply to Kay? The answer may be that what sounds like Dadaist poetry is, in fact, a highly elliptical cluster of parts standing in for whole stories; a kind of parody of the heraldic symbolism associated with imperialism. Their churned-up presentation is a method of defamiliarisation that should swiftly trigger afresh the knowledge of the organising principle they imply, or least begin the process of tessellation that may discover a viable relationship between the details. "'A"1-7', as we shall see, moves cyclically through a process of confusion and clarification, a series of churnings and 'trappings' (*OA*, 122).

¹³ Burton Hatlen, 'Art And/As Labor: Some Dialectical Patterns in "A"-1' through "A"-10, *Contemporary Literature*, 25 (1984), p. 212.

¹⁴ I am using the distinction between Apollonian and Dionysian creativity set out by Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy: Out of the Spirit of Music*, trans. Shaun Whiteside, ed. Michael Tanner (London: Penguin Books, 1993).

The cyclical process of destruction and rebirth continues in the next strophe of “‘A’2”. A group of sailors horse around playing a game that seems charged with homo-eroticism. They splash ‘Ricky’ with ‘white pail-wash’ as though marking him as an object of special desire. Their relationship with each other feels reminiscent of the crew of the Pequod at the sperm-butt losing themselves in the milk of human-kindness. If this association is available, then these sailors can be read as personifications of the desire to transgress the limits of nation and skin. This may at first seem fanciful, but in the context of the homophonic relationship between ‘seamen’ and ‘(semen)’ which Zukofsky explores in “‘A’3”, the sailors are clearly phallic Dionysian figures, and Ricky a type of Christ-figure. As this horsing around continues, the sailors’ transgressive play becomes indivisible from the text’s playfulness; it responds, textually, to the forces of repression and containment it identifies:

Grinds the sea of half-hours,
 Each half-hour the clocks strike,
 Half-human, half-equestrian,
 Clitter-clatter of wave-forms,
 Sea-horses up blind alleys,
 Never appeased, desire to break the cross-walls of the alleys
 Cross walls like locks of canal (never end-walls)
 rising, replacing,
 (*OA*, 118-119)

The clock divides the Dionysian sea up into rigid portions of time and space. The sea becomes more like a factory, or metaphor for the inescapable, monotonous grind of work on a production line, than a space of life-threatening energy. Confronted with these obstacles the repressed Dionysian energy represented by the sailors works itself out in a series of textual displacements. The sailors mutate into ‘Half-human, half-equestrian’ satyr

figures, lose their human-halves completely as the text follows the animal component of the hybrid into ‘wave-forms’ (white-horses?), and then finally transform into ‘sea-horses’ (not sea-dogs). The desires they signify keeps displacing itself into new, progressively less human forms as it tries to escape the prison of the sea. This reference to the clock, which sends ‘Sea-horses up blind alleys’ is reminiscent of the clock that threatens vision at the beginning of Pound’s ‘Canto V’ (*Cantos*, 17).

This phase of metaphorical journeying ends with a flourish:

Till of an afternoon
Launches the moon upon sea-whorl ; green, flowering,
opening leaf within leaf
Floats upon wave edge ; liveforever,
pearl-clean, giant-size,
Green leathery leaf within leathery vision—
(*OA*, 119)

The ‘whorl’ form seems to detach itself from the sea and transform the moon into the whorled petals of a flower. Is it the moon, is it flower, or is it simply words combined to produce a fabulous, hybrid, organic symbol? After the preceding evasions and displacements the text comes to a temporary rest in this key trope of organic composition, the flower form: Zukofsky writes a few lines further on, ‘the music is in the flower’ (*OA*, 119). ‘Zukofsky’ then transforms into a satyr and enters the heart of the flower vortex. In the centre he drowns his eyes in its ‘mild orbs’ (*OA*, 119). Again, this organic form and emblem of fugal composition proves capable of accommodating the restless Dionysian desire for self-dissolution. In this form the desire for oneness finds a collective, conceptual shape. At this point of self-loss in the formal shape of the flower, the flowering music

transforms into an engine. The power source of mass production is granted organic, natural status:

The flower is the steel piston at my chest,
 No air stirs, but, hear . . . the music steep
 in the center—
 (*OA*, 120)

This vision, or audition of natural artifice leads Zukofsky to attempt its poetic duplication:

I walked out upon Easter Sunday
 As who should say,
 This is my face,
 This is my form,
 Faces and forms, I would put
 you down
 In a style of leaves growing.
 (*OA*, 118)

On the day when the broken body of Christ is made whole through resurrection, the poet rediscovers a natural form of composition through simply notating and combining instances of perception.

*

The third movement opens with a mixture of allusive and elusive biographical fragments. What we make of them is up to us: ‘It’s all a matter of/ Determining—’ (*OA*, 122). One critic has explained the significance of this passage by relating it to biographical

details from Zukofsky's life,¹⁵ but what remains of this submerged biography has a generic shape: the remnants are more significant within the context Zukofsky provides than in the one which he chose to omit:

At eventide, cool hour of rest
It is your dead mouth singing,

Rickey,

Automobiles speed past the cemetery,
No gage measures,

No metre turns,
Sleep

With an open gas range
Beneath for a pillow.
(*OA*, 121)

This passage presents three ideas: that Rickey's dead voice is resurrected by the music of the *Matthew Passion*; that the world is indifferent to his death; and that Rickey has apparently committed suicide. Zukofsky goes on to offer a series of tantalising clues, as if he were forcing us to recognise the impossibility of determining the motive or cause of suicide. Whisky has gone missing ("Where is the Scotch?" (*OA*, 121)) and Ricky appears to have got out of a car and spilt it in a bush, perhaps having drunk some. A voice warns Ricky "No crossin' bridges", and then drunkenly declares "God's-gift-to-'oman ! when/ 'S after midnight" (*OA*, 122). The cause of Ricky's downfall appears to be drink, sex and cars. His previous incarnation as a satyr-sailor coupled with his taste for intoxication and

¹⁵ See Sandra Kumamoto Stanley, *Louis Zukofsky and the Transformation of a Modern American Poetics*, p. 18-24. Also Burton Hatlen, 'Art And/As Labor', p. 213. Hatlen identifies Rickey as 'Whittaker Chamber's brother, a youthful suicide'.

desire to cross bridges (a metaphor perhaps for the desire to become ‘other’), makes him a particularly Dionysian figure. Zukofsky offers him as a generic personification of errant American manhood: he has ‘the/ American tragedy in his lap—’ (*OA*, 122), which may link him with the ‘devil-may-care men who have taken/ to railroading/ out of sheer lust of adventure—’ (*OA*, 106) in Carlos Williams’ poem beginning, ‘The pure products of America/ go crazy—’. The type of male desires that constitute the cause of the ‘American tragedy’ are further suggested in “‘A’5’: ‘The reason why we’re not further along. . . / Ask Faust aquaplaning’ (*OA*, 129). In the quest for self-gratification and perhaps self-completion, or in Faust’s case, the apotheosis of the humanist self, the world runs off the rails of empirical, pragmatic order.

The boy who once horsed around with sailors, who becomes ‘a horse bridled’ (*OA*, 122), is now entombed and consumed by shapes made by and associated with the car: ‘Dead mouth/ (Cemetery rounded// By a gas tank)’ (*OA*, 123). This is the darkest section of “‘A’1-7’. However, as Ricky is a type of Christ/Attis/Adonis, the energy he signifies is dormant not void. It revives in the form of allusions to light, and in the textual game-playing involved in the couplets that span the unmarked transition from “‘A’3’ to “‘A’4’:

Lion-heart, my dove,
Pansy-over-the-heart, ricky-bird—

Carousel
Giant sparkler, boats,

(Carousel) lights of the river,
(Horses turning)

Tide turning,

Lights that matter,

Lights from the pier below
From the hill-lights,

Lights from lamps off the tree-green
Lamposts from level of a light

In a truck pulled (song)
Lanterns swinging from horses,

Horses' sides gleaming lights
From levels of water
(*OA*, 124)

The meaning of Ricky has slipped metonymically into the form of the carousel horses. As the couplets turn and return offering glimpses of the world, the images they present of the illuminated 'horses' of the carousel, of the lantern-hung 'real' horses, and of the 'lights of the river', are woven together in the culminating lines 'Horses' sides gleaming lights/ From levels of water'. Each 'glimpse' is textually alluded to in that dizzying line. If Ricky is the energy fed into the top of this sequence of couplets, by the end he has fully transformed into a complex of light and circular motion. This passage also exemplifies the technical effect Zukofsky felt distinguished his writing from his mentor's. In a letter to Pound dated 12 July 1931, Zukofsky wrote:

The difference between Cantos & "A" aside from diction (& quality of line) in the matter of musical approximation—The difference between polyphony (many voices of angels, if you will permit it) and one human voice thematically split in two—but so far the fugal principle is more obvious in the last. (*P/Z*, 112)

Zukofsky perceives Pound's method to be a 'polyphonic' arrangement of discrete voices, while his own poem, though polyphonic in certain passages, is made up of a single voice

that contains different themes, as in the final couplet of the sequence quoted above. Where Pound uses the ‘ply over ply’ method of composition, Zukofsky tries to incorporate his different strands into each line, and at times, into the moment of each word’s sounding out.

With the carousel passage, light re-enters the world. He closes “‘A’4’ with a direct correlation between Bach’s aesthetic and material productivity:

The courses we tide from—
 Tree of the Bach family
 Compiled by Sebastian himself.
 ‘ Veit Bach, a miller in Veichmar,
 Delighted most in his lute
 Which he brought to the mill
 And played while it was grinding.
 A pretty noise the pair must have made,
 Teaching him to keep time.
 But, apparently, that was how
 Music first came into our family !’

Carousel—flour runs—
 Song drifts from the noises.
 (OA, 128-129)

The cyclical motion of the fugue has, according to Zukofsky’s deployment of Bach’s family researches, an origin in the rhythms of physical production. Zukofsky’s predominant use of the dactylic verse foot enhances the sense of the revival of energy. This is song that recycles all the cycles Zukofsky has established.

‘A billboard advertisement’ may be the answer to the riddling description that opens “‘A’5”. So fastidiously does the text deny itself the unifying name of the thing it describes that it becomes yet another exploration of possible verbal manoeuvres. Marjorie Perloff has interpreted this kind of defamiliarisation and dismemberment of the advert as a subversive deconstruction of the ideological codes hidden in visual culture: images are not to be trusted, and the gaze of the consumer is to be thwarted by the opaque verbal text.¹⁶ Verbal opacity certainly characterises parts of this description, but Zukofsky is less aggressive towards the advert. He appears to take it as a starting point for an exploration of the process of translating the visual image into words. Where should the eye begin?

Thread : middle down the brown leaf.
 In the next hand, a cigarette.
 Approach brown leaf-edge with burning
 Above which will be printed (as above ashes)
in autumn brown
 Horizontal lettering
 Held vertically
 Held—held obliquely—
The city’s university rise
 trees’ branches space—
 airing out—
 DUNHILL
 Comfort.
 (OA, 128-129)

There may be some irony intended in the juxtaposition of the university with the promise of comfort from a cigarette, as if universities no longer provided challenges but mild intoxication. On the whole this seems to be an attempt to find a verbal means of describing the visual dynamics of the advert’s typography, an attempt that yields the opportunity to

¹⁶ Marjorie Perloff, *Radical Artifice*, pp. 54-92.

recapitulate the descent-into-winter motif.

The theme of winter and disintegration continues in the form of the complex musical list described at the beginning of this chapter; a list which should, now that some of the themes of the poem have been rehearsed, ‘make more sense’. While the tangled heap of bodies and machinery may at first have seemed like a version of Pound’s ‘Palux Laerna’ (‘Canto XVI’, *Cantos*, 69) these bodies represent virtuous figures and forces. If this broth of words is at all chthonic, it describes Hades awaiting the signal of revolutionary light to begin social rebirth and economic renewal. For instance, the ‘Miner’s legs’ are mixed up with the words ‘marble-blue’ (a colour which echoes Christ’s ‘legs, blue tendons bleeding’); with the subterranean ‘trainmen’ of “‘A’1”; with the origin and outcome of Bach’s milling ancestry; and with Rickey (*OA*, 129). Despite being ground up, and despite the impeding desires of the aquaplaning ‘Faust’ (*OA*, 129), there is a hint of light: ‘(But this is a swell sun, brother comrade,)’ (*OA*, 129).

However, this luminous Communist energy is blocked once again. Zukofsky shifts from the loft of the concert hall to the rat-lofts of New York in what constitutes another Marxist ‘Image’:

Chorale, the kids in the loft
 (O love untold, love lying close) ;
 Or say, words have knees,
 water’s in them, all joints crack,—
 (Yet N.Y. tonight, the rat-lofts
 light
 with the light of a trefoil ;
 Purple clover,
 She wore her shoes three years—

(The soles new as the sunned black
of her grave-turf;
Speech bewailing a Wall,
Night of economic extinctions
Death's encomium—
And day, leaves blowing over and over.
(OA, 130)

The religious significance of the trefoil may operate ironically, as may its paradigmatic value as organic artifice, for in the circumstance of the rat-loft these values neither communicate nor effect change: it is merely a shape. A template of light changes nothing for those extinguished by economic competition and the 'Wall'-Street Crash. This self-critical subtlety blunts as Zukofsky pushes life and death into a pregnant proximity. His line, 'the sunned black /of her grave turf' suggests we make an uncomfortable temporal elision: we are asked to bear witness to 'her' suffering and death, and then to leap forward to the thought of her matter resurrecting itself within the space of two words. She becomes no more than a cypher for material process. What kind of revolutionary attitude is it that takes solace in the thought that at least the poor starving in garrets will be reborn as grass? This implied dependency on the renewal of matter to right social injustice is further enhanced by the autumnal imagery that closes this passage. Is this an emblem of economic disaster, or part of the process leading towards new life? To a Marxist they may be one and the same.

Following on from the above passage is an intriguing and nightmarish hunt for the object hidden in the word 'it': 'For I have seen *it*, I, writhed, self-taunt/ tracked *it*/self down in the mirror'(my italics) (OA, 130). Is this guilt over the 'witnessed' death? Zukofsky is not specific. Indeed, the only thing clear is that 'it' is mirrored by 'its'-self. If the word

‘it’ has finally tracked ‘itself’ down, ‘it’ discovers nothing in the moment of confrontation but its lettered self. The object hidden by ‘it’ remains hidden. Is the inability to speak its name because ‘it’ is an unmentionable, repressed thought, or because the object cannot be made identical to any descriptive word? In other words, is this passage saying, ‘I have seen it’, but I cannot say ‘it’ as I experienced ‘it’. This musing passage goes on to complicate the status of the hidden object: ‘The edges of no one like it looking ; everlasting ; / Of an afternoon’ (*OA*, 130-131). This unnamable thing, or cancelled self (‘no one’), has edges and continues to look. And the answer to this riddle? ‘It’ could be words; but ‘it’ could also be the otherness of one’s being to the way one speaks oneself. In other words, that being and self cannot be tracked down in language. This exploration echoes the concern of poem ‘15’ considered in chapter two: ‘—a mouth knowing; / close, its unowned owner.’ The question is indeed profound: in what sense does language accommodate being? We are both ‘it’ and hidden in ‘it’.

This anxious hunt for self-presence in the sign plays itself out into a referential space: a bulky Catholic woman, ‘Mrs Green’, moves back from a window (*OA*, 131). In this ‘scene’, the window becomes a metaphor for the tension between transgressive desires and repression. Beyond the glass her daughter makes love ‘behind ramshackle’. This lovemaking is accompanied by a series of images of rebirth (‘New are, the trees’ (*OA*, 131)), immediate contact (‘Against bark a child’s forehead’ (*OA*, 131), lucidity (‘Under sky clarities’ (*OA*, 132) and both metaphorical and literal insemination:

Winds’ intercourse with the fields,
Breath, love hardly over, trembling.
(*OA*, 132)

The breath of the lovers harmonises with the inspiring wind. This beginning of new, material life is accompanied by a renewal of vision:

Walking out :
 The trees showing sunlight,
 Sunlight trees,
 Words ranging forms.
 (OA, 132)

Through a kind of material chiasmus, ‘The trees showing sunlight, / Sunlight trees,’ Zukofsky emphasises the materiality of both trees and light. If we have had the afflatus materialised in the previous quotation, then in this instance, the divine effulgence that shines the reflected light of the heavenly idea into the corporeal world has been given matter to illuminate: it would not be visible but for the reflective surface of the trees. Zukofsky goes on to imply that a similar relationship exists between ‘Words’ and ‘forms’. Words shape perception and in turn should be shaped by it: words *range* forms, they do not *arrange* them. In other words, according to Zukofsky’s aesthetic, words measure (‘range’) out perceptions as the poem ranges (wanders) into new space. The structural metaphor of the poem-as-walk, in which the subject/text is defined by the chance occurrences encountered in an environment will be picked up by William Carlos Williams in his long poem *Paterson*.

*

The sixth movement begins with a vortex of plenitude. Then, as if in explanation

of this profusion of related material, a voice comments: ‘Those loved seeking their own completion, in a voice, their/ own voice sounding—’ (*OA*, 132). The comma-pause after ‘completion’ renders this statement less than straightforward. Without the comma one would assume that the qualification, in ‘a voice’, was indeed ‘*their* [those loved] / *own* voice sounding’. With the comma, however, we have two voices: the beloved’s voice and an anonymous voice through which the beloved’s voice can be heard sounding. In other words, their personal voices seeking completion have been folded into a collective voice. ‘Sounding’ can be read in at least two ways: either the individuals sound out through this collective voice, or sound (dive) into the depths of its collective sonority. This returns us to the ethics of choral singing and Zukofsky’s epic epistemology. Even at our most personally expressive we use the collective medium. Completion, this implies, occurs through the immersion of the ego into the network of collective meaning. Love is the desire to sound the otherness of the common language from which the notion of the private self is woven. However, the emphasis is on *seeking*, rather than achieving; on how the head ‘*would be*’ if it could arrive in the presence of this collective meaning. Even if unattainable, the effort still matters, for that is the profession of love.

Zukofsky wants his poem to ‘slap’ its audience tired of ‘trying to see differences’ (*OA*, 133). Is this tiredness good or bad? Contingent upon it, is a lowering ‘to a mutual, common level’ (*OA*, 133). In Pound one might imagine this to be a critique of democracy, but here it produces a selfless commitment to accompany others: ‘Each at his best obligato to the other’ (*OA*, 133). From a Marxist perspective, this seems in the spirit of Communism, but how can one reconcile it with lowering and tiredness? Is it only when ground down to exhaustion that the mutual realisation of injustice slaps the suffering

majority in the face? On a poetical level, is it only when one becomes tired of watching one's response that one truly becomes susceptible to the 'word-sleights' in a passage like that at the beginning the fourth movement? Zukofsky is not clear. It is up to us. In the context of the *Cantos*, we might associate 'word-sleight' with 'shells given out by shells' ('Canto VII', *Cantos*, 27). But as I have been exploring, Zukofsky's 'word-sleight' is the key element in his polyphonic technique. It is necessary to recognise that words are not transparent, and not logo-centric, in order to understand how language works as a collective mechanism.

Here is one final example of the paradox of clear speech:

Environs—the sea
 The ears—doors
 The words—shutting themselves visibly—
 Lost—visible.
 (*OA*, 134)

Is this 'the sea' or are these words made visibly of ink? Do I see the sea through 'the sea', or do I hear 'the sea' through my ears and then see the sea. The word is one thing and then another, hinging on whether I choose to see beyond the word to what it refers, or choose to see it as a material thing—a signifier. Words shut 'themselves visibly', or are shut (i.e. their referential action is interfered with) in order to make them visible on the page. This is one set of rules that might make these syntactically unrelated words play the game of coherence. However, the passage has a slightly richer significance. Environs and the sea have appeared before and bring with them the ghosts of the contexts in which they were first defined by the poem. Both are linked with the themes of circulation, and

encirclement. The ambiguous grammatical status of ‘environs’ is not wasted. It could be the plural noun signifying surroundings, or the verb to encircle. Does someone encircle the sea, or is the sea the ear’s environment? This option adds to Zukofsky’s indications elsewhere that the circle of perception, and the circle of matter cannot be divided—one cannot exist separately from the other. While Zukofsky rarely poses a question in question form, he regularly demonstrates problems that make the reader ask questions. Surrounded by the welter of sense-data, how much do words tell us of the space of experience they designate, while simultaneously signifying the absence of that space during the reading process? How much do they control our experience of the world?

Zukofsky juxtaposes this extreme exploration of the problem of communication with a parody of the simplest and most insidious form of textual control—the life-style formula:

Asked Albert who introduced relativity—
 “And what is the formula for success ?”
 “X=work, y=play, Z=keep your mouth shut.”
 (OA, 134)

Zukofsky seems unable to resist providing the reader with the opportunity to read against the overt sentiment of the text. The knowing irony behind this question and answer is that, had Zukofsky followed this prescription for success, “‘A’1-7’ would not have existed, perhaps to Zukofsky’s own advantage. The 1930s were the great age of the ‘how-to-do-it

book'.¹⁷ These, in a way, were the crass versions of the educative texts produced by Pound and Zukofsky. They sold models of behaviour that effectively extended the values, aspirations and practices of capitalist success into many aspects of personal human interaction. The self was now a commodity that could be traded and worked upon. If the artist wanted to resist commodification, he or she had to resist passing on homilies and formulas for behaviour that could be consumed without thought. In an essay entitled 'The Literalisation of the Theatre', Brecht wrote, 'it is perhaps more important to think above the stream [of dramatic action] than to think within the stream.'¹⁸ Zukofsky was clearly interested in provoking a similarly analytical and productive state of concentration.

Zukofsky explores the dangers of 'common-sense' through a series of quotations from Henry Ford:

"I read poetry, and I enjoy it
If it says anything,
But so often it doesn't say anything,"
says Henry.
(*OA*, 138-139)

Zukofsky juxtaposes Henry Ford's appetite for sentiment with perhaps the most tentative and faith-filled lines in the whole of "'A"1-7':

The common air includes

¹⁷ Warren I. Susman, *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), p. 165.

¹⁸ Bertolt Brecht, 'The Literalisation of the Theatre', in *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. and trans. by John Willet (London: Methuen, 1986), p. 44.

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In “‘A’7” Zukofsky appears to try to fulfill a desire he first expressed in ‘Poem Beginning “The”’:

238 If horses could but sing Bach, mother,—
(*Exile* 3, 22)

To work out whether Zukofsky achieves this desire I am going to look at the word ‘horses’ and consider whether or not he makes it sing in a choral manner in “‘A’7. Despite being a single sound, do his ‘different techniques’ (*OA*, 152) make the word ‘horses’ polyphonic? Can it contain different voices, and if so, how? It begins:

Horses : who will do it ? out of manes ? Words
Will do it, out of manes, out of airs, but
They have no manes, so there are no airs, birds
Of words, from me to them no singing gut.
For they have no eyes, for their legs are wood,
For their stomachs are logs with print on them,
Blood-red, red lamps hang from necks or where could
Be necks, two legs stand A, four together M.
“Street Closed” is what print says on their stomachs;
That cuts out everybody but the diggers;
You’re cut out, and she’s cut out, and, the jiggers
Are cut out, No ! we can’t have such nor bucks
 As won’t, tho they’re not here pass thru a hoop
 Strayed on a manhole—me ? Am on a stoop.
(*OA*, 152)

How should one begin to read this cryptic, overwrought verse? Is it simply verbal music, or is there a discernible message and method in its strange syntax and vocabulary? The

colon after 'horses' may signify that they are the objects to whom 'words' are going to 'do' something. But, equally, they may be the objects from whom an answer to the question 'who will do it' is sought, and they could even be asking the question. Or the word 'Horses' could simply be a heading in the text. There is ambiguity surrounding the operation of this word from the outset. However, this is swiftly displaced by the statement that whatever is to be done will be done by words that do, in fact, have an origin: they are 'out of manes, out of airs'. In the context of horses, it might be imagined that the words are going to describe the physical, equine referent of 'manes'; in other words, that their meaning derives and is validated by the thing that they name, and the history of lyric versification. It is just possible that 'airs' has enough airiness to make the reader think of another, less palpable referent for 'manes', defined by the OED as 'the venerated ghosts of dead ancestors'. In the context of the allusions to the crucifixion that are to follow, this interpretation may just be possible. In this ghostly context 'air' might signify thin air. In which case the words derive their meaning from an ancestral or historical origin that is simultaneously there and thin air. That these readings are even faintly plausible is enough to disturb the tenure of the other readings. As 'Words' is the subject of the sentence, 'They have no manes', must refer back to them. To say a word does not have a hairy mane is to state the obvious. But then the obvious sometimes needs stating. In this case, there is evidence that this denial of the most obvious referent provided by the preceding context forms part of a reflexive tactic which seeks to obtain for the reader of the poem a clear, empirical sight of the word as a physical object, disconnected from its particular referent. The denial of the image of a horse's mane returns the reader to the material cause of meaning; to the slippery polysemous word on the page. These words that have an airy origin possess no essential connection to the material object. Zukofsky appears to be

asserting the arbitrariness of the sign in order to explore how its tendency to disseminate meaning may be enhanced by the supplementation of those contexts that vie to determine its significance. Words may be formed by breath, but their meaning is focused by their historical and contemporary use.

Words will do whatever it is they are to do out of themselves, independent of both referent and author. As the poem puts it: ‘birds/ Of words, from me to them no singing gut’. Indeed, the poem’s continual transformation and exchange of pronouns confounds any attempt to construe the identity of the speaker and the addressed object. From this it seems fair to assume that the poem is indicating that there is neither a speaker ‘in’ the poem, nor a fictional figure the poem is trying to teach or change. The text has been depersonalised, it seems, to collapse the distinction between author and audience. In effect, this prevents the reader from identifying with a set of values signified by the authorial pronoun. The instability of the meaning of the poem does not allow that moment of self-reflection to occur. Instead, the reader is directed into a continuous process of interpretation and revision. In the next stanza we are told, ‘you’re not here,/ A sign creaks—LAUNDRY TO-LET (creaks—wind—)—’ (*OA*, 152). It is as if we are being simultaneously evicted from the text and tempted to take up a tenancy within its word-laundry. Later the poem exclaims, in the context of crucifixion symbolism, ‘Launder me,/ Mary’ (*OA*, 154), making this word-laundry-poem, by extension, a redemptive, and purificatory habitation. The words washing the reader (Mary will be given explicit associations with the sea), may be cleansing and clarifying. And this, it seems, is dependent on the reader’s recognition that the poem is not a virtual space in which he or she may enter to commune with the author, or the origin of the word. The cleansed and

redeemed state is one in which the reader recognises language as language, and rediscovers its metaphorical relationship to the non-textual world.

The notional road barrier with the sign ““Street Closed”” printed on it is ‘opened’ by an exploration of the metaphorical content of the sign used to recognise it. We are carried forward by the barrier, but not into a description of the physical reality of the closed street. Blocking our entrance into the virtual space, the poem takes us on a journey through the shifting terrain of metaphors. There is no single reality that the poem seeks to illuminate, rather each word carries various worlds of denotation, connotation and association. It is important to recognise that the words ““Street closed”” are not printed on a real barrier, but on an unstable sign, a wooden ‘horse’. A poem like this can only be written once the notion that language should devote itself to precisely picturing reality is given up. It is necessary to accept the opacity of language to discover its inherently linguistic qualities, apart from its ability to indicate a significant referent. This moving barrier is an apt metaphor for the relationship between reader and text. Once the reader stops trying to look through the text to a world it may be imagined to contain, its surface begins to reveal its subtle modes of metaphorical transport. In the course of the poem the notional tenor and vehicle of metaphors are given equal weight. Neither component refers to a more significant ‘real’ world. And because the poem does not seek to correspond to a real situation, vehicle and tenor can separate, re-unite, and pass through each other:

“Closed”? then follow me
 For the wood-grain skin laundered to pass thru
 (OA, 243)

If 'the wood-grain skin laundered' is taken to be a description of the metaphorical clothing of the wooden barrier with the word 'horse' written on it, then the barrier is going to pass through itself. Clearly, this is an action only made possible by the complex web of associations that the text builds up around key words. For instance, the phrase 'we'll open ruts' half-rhymes us back to the 'bucks' in the opening stanza. A buck may be both a horse, the motion of a horse or a cart. Of course, carts are what will open ruts. Travelling via the synonym 'buck' back to the word 'horse', the poem gives the same sense that the vehicle of the horse/barrier metaphor now rides through its tenor, the barrier. The barrier has been displaced from that notional position of being the reality that the poem is trying to elucidate. By acting as a barrier to the mind that wishes to see something through the poem, it opens up the complex grain of its textual surface.

The referent signified by 'horses' is in the process of mutation between the shapes and states of wood, flesh and alphabet: 'Blood-red, red lamps hang from necks or where could/ Be necks, two legs stand A, four together M.' As if reprising the moment of visual association that lead to the designation of 'horse' as a sign for the wooden barrier, Zukofsky makes 'A' and 'M' icons for the visual appearance of the barrier. Thereafter, 'Am' is curiously haunted with the shape of the legs of the wooden 'horse'. It is not possible to determine why Zukofsky should have intended this, it may be one of a whole shoal of red herrings, but it is there in the text, available as an example of the way a word's normal meaning can be disturbed by proximity to a context in which it is used differently. It makes the sign for *being* uncanny and unfamiliar, haunted by unwanted 'airs' and associations. The poem explores ways of adding layers of meaning to existing signs. 'A' and 'M' are made to operate like ideograms. Zukofsky was no doubt familiar with the

Chinese ideogram for a man, which, like the letter ‘A’, could be said to have two legs. But who would see the letter ‘A’ as a pair of legs unless it were pointed out by a verbal definition, or indicated by the animating effects of a comic manuscript-illuminator?

Two legs stand “A”—
Pace them ! in revolution are the same !
(*OA*, 153)

It is unclear what ‘in revolution are the same’ means: it could be an obvious observation that revolving the foot in a pacing motion does not alter its condition; or it could mean that all feet, no matter what the status of their owners, are made equal by political revolution.

Zukofsky appears to be aligning the Christian spiritual economy of regeneration through self-sacrifice with the suffering and sacrifice of life necessary to achieve a worker’s utopia:

Says you ! Then I, singing, It is not the sea
But what floats over : hang from necks or where could
Be necks, blood red, red lamps (Night), Launder me,
Mary! Sea of horses that once were wood,
Green and, and leaf on leaf, and dancing bucks,
Who take liveforever ! Taken a pump
And shaped a flower. “Street Closed” on their stomachs.
But the street has moved ; at each block a stump
That blossoms red. . .
(*OA*, 154)

‘Mary!’ is connected with ‘Sea of horses’ through a groan-inducing pun: the sea is marey, filled with sea-horses, or, perhaps is covered with white horses. And, of course, there is

the association between the Virgin Mary/Stella Maris and the sea. This is followed by a transformation of the referent signified by ‘wood’, from timber to greenwood. Simply recognising that the living origin of timber coexists in a synonym for timber has a rejuvenating effect; as though the proliferation of meaning around a word were capable of transforming it into the textual equivalent of a living object. Just as people contain innumerable and unpredictable characteristics, so the word, resurrected from a narrow context of use, may possess a similar complexity. ‘Pump’ is one of the sounds that accompany the ‘dancing bucks’ in the sestet of the fifth sonnet. The sound is connected to the horses that have the words ““Street Closed”” printed on them at the beginning of the poem. Zukofsky reiterates this context, and by rhyming pump with stump further emphasises this connection. Somehow a flower is then shaped out of this pump. If Mary can also be made to signify a sea of mares, then it is quite possible for a pump to be a *flower*— quite literally a thing that makes liquid flow. What is the identity of the liquid that flows from this pump-stump-wooden-horse? From the preceding imagining of the red lamp to signify the body of Christ crucified on a street barrier (Against wood his body close;/ Speaks: My face at where its forehead might be,/ The plank’s end’s a forehead waving a rose — (OA, 243)), the flowing liquid can clearly be associated with blood. Completing this emblem of sacrifice and redemption, the pump flowing blood becomes a kind of secular flowering rood: ‘a stump/ that blossoms red’ (OA, 154)

*

This series of readings has set out to demonstrate how Zukofsky’s continual relocation of words in new contexts gives them polyphonic, rather than indeterminate

meaning. While certain passages of “‘A’1-7’ may have been composed ‘Just for the fun of it’ (*OA*, 155), this loading of the word with multiple meanings, both for pleasure and as a didactic tool, reveals our astonishing ability to interpret language and the flexibility and subtlety of the ‘laws’ that allow it to signify. Setting aside the Marxist dogma that Zukofsky explores in the poem, it is this examination, and exercising of the potential of language to make coherent meaning, that is truly and enduringly revolutionary.

CHAPTER 5

RETURN TO SHORE

In a letter dated November 22, 1932, George Oppen wrote to William Carlos

Williams:

Dear Williams:

I think everyone has felt what you say of Louis. His immediate environment—the space most people fill by gesture—he fills some other way, or else it *is* a vacuum. . . Perhaps it's seeing clearly rather than doing anything which is experience. . . ¹

Better an honest indication of the absence of metaphysical presence than the concealment of this absence beneath the noise of elaborate rhetorical gestures. But is this description accurate in light of the baroque texture of Zukofsky's verse identified in the preceding chapter? Is it possible to see without 'doing'; and what exactly does Oppen have in mind when he talks about 'doing'? If thinking is a form of doing, then, to adapt Zukofsky's formulation, this may be a matter of deconstructing the 'predatory intention' of concepts that would otherwise limit the significance of the object. This returns us to a fundamental concern in Objectivist writing: the relationship between experience and what can be said about it without compromising its otherness, and what can be predicated on that experience with conviction in the absence of an authorising metaphysical presence.

As we have seen, a poem can present itself in such a way that it becomes apparent to the reader that he or she is actively filling the space of the poem with his or her thought rather than uncovering the time-locked presence of the author. If we extend Oppen's

¹ George Oppen, *The Selected Letters of George Oppen*, ed. by Rachel Blau DuPlessis (Durham and London: Duke Univ. Press, 1990), p. 3.

description of Zukofsky's relationship to his 'immediate environment' to include poetry, in the context of this use of reflexive tactics, the notion that Zukofsky's poems may be vacuums can begin to make sense. For the poem which points back at itself and declares itself to be a linguistic object may be said, in some sense, to be a vacuum deliberately constructed for a particular purpose— that of sucking in the interpretive action of the reader in such away that he or she becomes sensible of the process of interpretation as it occurs. This 'vacuum' may be constructed, as we have seen, through the conspicuous absence, or rejection, of those signs of authorial intention that seek to control the meaning of its reception and the world it describes. As mechanics to the machine, so should the reader be to the phenomenon of the poem. However, before this relationship can develop, the reader must have the fabric of his or her prejudices and preconceptions unpicked, so that the linguistic evidence of the poem may be seen afresh, and ourselves glimpsed and obscured in the fluid process of reading. As many of the Objectivists have demonstrated, to achieve such an encounter the poet has to challenge habits of reading; and Oppen briefly wrote with an ironic hypotactic grandeur that both seems to emulate Zukofsky's compositional tactics and to share his strategic goals. For a short while, he too played with vacuous rhetorical gestures of the kind visible in Zukofsky's poem '15', in order to reveal the essential emptiness and material presence of the poem.

The more extreme examples of this phase in Oppen's writing do not figure in any collection, nor are they included in Oppen's *Collected Poems*. In this chapter I am going to point out how they typify the brief Objectivist phase with which this thesis has been concerned, and to identify how and perhaps why Oppen moved on from them. In the January 1932 edition of *Poetry*, Oppen published a group of four poems under the title

'Discrete Series'. Only one of them made it into his collection *Discrete Series*, published by the Objectivist Press in 1934. The 1932 group begins with one of the subsequently omitted poems:

I

This room,
 the circled wind
 Straight air of dawn
 low noon
 The darkness. Not within
 The mound of these
 is anything
 To fit the prying of your lips
 Or feed their wide bright flowering.

And yet will movement so exactly fit
 Your limbs—
 as snow
 Fills the vague intricacies of the day, unlit:
 So will your arms
 fall in the space
 Assigned to gesture
 (In the momentless air
 The distant adventurous snow.)²

If the indented lines of this poem, with the exception of the one preceded by a dash, are read as continuations of the lines they are stepped down from, then this poem is a kind of sonnet. That dash, accompanied as it is by an apparent turn of thought, or *volta*, signals a division that discloses the kind of sonnet form this poem oddly distorts: it defines the octave and sestet of a Petrarchan sonnet. The unpredictable network of cross-rhymed

² George Oppen, 'Discrete Series', *Poetry*, XXXIX (1932), p. 198.

consonances, and the use of true and slant end-rhymes, all add to the feeling that Oppen is engaged here with the history of prosody. In among the works of the reactionary ‘Tennysonian’ sonneteers that constituted a fair proportion of *Poetry*’s content in 1932, this would have stood out as a sonnet gone awry; as something disturbed and disturbing.

The opening line, ‘This room’, strengthens the possibility of a dialogic exchange between Oppen’s poem and the rhetorical gestures of the traditional sonnet; for the comparison between sonnet and room was an old and well known one. John Donne’s ‘The Canonization’ contains perhaps the most famous example of this analogy:

And if no piece of chronicle we prove,
 We’ll build in sonnets pretty rooms;
 As well a well wrought urn becomes
 The greatest ashes, as half-acre tombs. . .³

The shift Oppen makes from room to mound curiously matches the shift from room to tomb. But where Donne envisages the poem as a public, private space, equivalent in its paradigmatic architectural form to the love it contains, Oppen attacks the very notion that a poem may contain, no matter how well wrought, the physical and psychological space of the author’s existence. The attack begins with a pointing gesture that is to become reflexive: it points at ‘This room’. A triad of oxymorons then follow, forcing the reader, as they will not resolve into a finely nuanced truth or yield a moment of psychological recognition, to confront the room of the word. Compared with a classic Jamesian

³ John Donne, ‘The Canonization’, *John Donne: The Oxford Authors*, ed. John Carey (Oxford: OUP, 1990), p. 96.

oxymoron like 'placid acuteness',⁴ Oppen's 'circled wind' and 'straight air' are distinctly uninformative: they are more closely related to Dada's deliberate use of catachresis.

The 'well wrought urn' of conventional rhetoric has become a 'mound' of carefully disorganised semantic relationships. However, while Oppen prevents the reader from projecting a visual or psychological fantasy into the text, he gestures towards another space. The dark, closed-off, obscurity of the words that constitute 'The mound' are contrasted by the poem's identification of someone's 'wide bright flowering' 'lips': because the identity of their owner is not specified, and because Oppen has established a reflexive convention, they could well be ours, as much as those of an unidentified third person, as we open our mouths to speak the poem. This granted, the poem implies the reader/third-person will derive neither sustaining essence nor 'pattern' for love from this dismal text. Instead, as in Zukofsky's poem '15', Oppen's wry sonnet returns us to the presence of our own bodies as we make the poem signify either in our heads or out loud. In other words, it signifies *us* instead of fictive 'pretty rooms', and does so without telling us what we are. The pivotal 'And yet' at first seems merely a piece of rhetorical mimicry; it prepares for the qualification of a proposition that has proposed nothing other than its wordedness. The qualification only introduces further confusion. How does 'movement so exactly fit' our 'limbs'? It is an odd discrimination. By making a distinction between a motivating force and the body into which it fits, the poem recalls that area of philosophical contention concerned with the relationship between mind, or soul, and the body. The shift between the sonnet's octave and sestet allows for both the construction and

⁴ Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, ed. with introd. by Geoffrey Moore and notes by Patricia Crick (London: Penguin Books, 1984), p. 61

deconstruction of this distinction. By closing the octave with a dash, the phrase ‘as snow/ fills the vague intricacies of day, unlit’ can work as a reflection of the relationship between ‘movement’ and ‘limbs’ stated at the close of the octave. In this comparison, hinged by the comparative ‘as’, snow stands in for the impulse to move, and the day, through which snow falls, stands in for the body.

But if *like* falling snow, then movement has innumerable points of motivation and no single identifiable centre of impulse. The poem ironically disintegrates the will as it tries to figure its relation to the body. Reading on, this description of snow comes under the gravitational influence of another, stronger comparative, which overwhelms the separating colon: ‘as snow/ Fills the vague intricacies of the day, unlit:/ So will your arms/ fall in the space/Assigned to gesture’. As snow falls obscurely, so our bodies will fulfill the spaces of gesture with a similar lack of clarity or volition. With the arrival at this conclusion, all that becomes clear is that the poem has, in a sense, already fulfilled its prediction. We have been shaped by the *assignments* it has carried us through. We have been worked like puppets; or have fitted ourselves into the poem with all the volition of falling snow. In which case, Oppen’s sonnet can be read as an exploration of the nature of our autonomy while reading: does the poem read us, or do we read the poem? It implies that we cannot separate ourselves from the language that speaks our selves into existence. And we certainly cannot transcend the intentional effect of language when reading a poem. The otherness of ‘momentless air’ is shaped by the language which proposes its unhuman a-temporality.

The sonnet defines three simple issues. Firstly, that poems do not contain the

presence of their author: this militates against the simple search for the author's intentions or feelings. Secondly, that verse forms carry with them a history of usage that may be both exploited and subverted (in other words, that poetry is intertextual and dialogic). And thirdly, that language assigns us our place in the world: it both reveals the world's existence and, as a consequence, may control how we perceive its existence. The action of Oppen's poem in the context of this third point, is to apply as little control as possible to both reader and the world, which is perhaps the textual equivalent of the experience of chaotic openness that the poem points us towards at its close. Another poem from the 1932 group, also omitted from the final collection, addresses similar issues; although it initially appears to state simply that transgressive acts are more memorable than their mundane alternatives:

II

When, having entered—

Your coat slips smoothly from your shoulders to the waiter:

How, in the face of this, shall we remember,
Should you stand suddenly upon your head

Your skirts would blossom downward

Like an anemone.⁵

For a poem so involved with the description of temporal relationships, it is difficult to work out what moment in time the voice of the poem occupies. Has this couple already entered the restaurant, or is this a fantasy of how, when they will have entered, they will behave?

⁵ George Oppen, 'Discrete Series', *Poetry*, 198-199.

The curiously figurative phrase, ‘in the face of this’, situated in what appears to be the main clause of the sentence, seems to point to the present moment, but what does ‘this’ refer to? The lineation makes it point two ways: both back to the mundane disrobing and forward to an altogether more sexy revelation. There is enough deliberate ambiguity for a third direction of pointing to become apparent. It may also point reflexively to the face of the page on which it is printed. In which case, the question is made out of the answer: i.e. language. The auxiliary verb, often avoided in Imagist poetry for reason of its interference with the immediacy of communication, allows memories to be situated in the past and related to the present and the future. The lineation of the poem, its involuted, hypotactic arrangement of phrases, and its confusing time scheme, all work to blur the distinction between what has and has not happened, a blurring that returns the reader to a closer study of the text.

Why did Oppen cut these poems? In the context of the 1934 collection *Discrete Series*,⁶ their reflexive techniques might have provoked Dadaist associations incongruent with the collection’s overall concern with the notation of discrete instances of perception. Perhaps Oppen felt that the battle to evict the fallacy of authorial intention from the poem, and to revoke the notion of language as a medium subordinate to the immanent, objective significance of the thing, had been waged and won. However, Oppen did not abandon his interest in exploring the phenomenological properties and limits that inform the two preceding poems. *Discrete Series* (1934) closes with this poem:

⁶ George Oppen, *Discrete Series*, with a Preface by Ezra Pound (New York: The Objectivists Press, 1934). Hereafter abbreviated to *DS*. Due to the rarity of this edition I will also supply the page reference for poems from *Discrete Series* republished in *The Collected Poems Of George Oppen* (New York: New Directions, 1976). Hereafter abbreviated to *CPGO*.

Written structure,
 Shape of art,
 More formal
 Than a field would be
 (existing in it) —
 Her pleasure's
 Looser;
 'O—'

'Tomorrow?'—

Successive
 Happenings
 (the telephone)
 (DS, 37: CPGO, 14)

The shape of a poem is more 'formal' than experiencing the existence of a field. Even though this poem signifies randomness through its discontinuous syntax and its lineation, it still organises that randomness through a careful use and abuse of linguistic signs and literary conventions. As in the sonnet from the 1932 sequence, Oppen brackets those signs which designate the field of experience that lies, in its integrity, beyond the descriptive capacities of the poem, beyond the poem's formal organisation of 'Successive/Happenings.' What should be the balance between the disorder of sense-data and the ordering, organising activity of the poem?

The poems in *Discrete Series* are written with a phenomenology of reading in mind: 'One moves between reading and re-reading, / The shape is a moment.' (DS, 27, CPGO, 11). According to this, the significance of a text cannot be received as an immediate whole, just as the world to which it may point cannot be represented in its entirety; both are susceptible to the time/space continuum. As a consequence, the significance of a poem is received through a 'collage' of fragments whose size is limited by what the eye is

capable of receiving during each moment in which it fixes its attention on a part of the verse line. The final poem from *Discrete Series*, which we have briefly looked at above, exploits this phenomenological limit to the scope of the conceptual unit by using the typographical layout of the poem to isolate individual words. Each of these words become the sole focus of a moment of perception; each one, a single discrete event in the process of reading—or to use Oppen's description, one happening in a succession of happenings. Through this isolation of individual words the normal reading action, which usually involves relating phrasal parts to a larger semantic unit, is defamiliarised: the action of relating part to whole is made more strenuous, and the discontinuity that the larger semantic unit may obscure, made more obvious. Oppen makes the process of reading, which can sometimes feel like a timeless experience, a process that occurs both in space and time. There is no other place, outside time, in which the meaning of the poem exists. Each act of reading is contingent on an historical moment. Because of the frequent absence of an organising concept drawing the successive happenings of Oppen's poems together into a Poundian moment of crystallisation, they have more in common with Taupin's aesthetic of information. However, Oppen's technique of dislocating the larger semantic structure into short units of perception/conception does create the kind of ambiguities found in a poem like Zukofsky's '—“Her Soil's Birth”: (Madison)'. For instance, the dash that follows '(existing in it) —' renders ambiguous the relationship between 'Her pleasure's/ looser' and the 'field'. In another reading this could refer to and demonstrate the looser pleasures of the written structure when read as a phenomenon that occurs through time. Oppen is not simply interested in presenting a stream of information, but in how we participate in determining the meaning of the poem.

Oppen offers a comparison between reading and drawing:

Drawing

Not by growth
 But the
 Paper, turned, contains
 This entire volume
 (*DS*, 35: *CPGO*, 14)

‘Growth’ implies continuity and destination: a seed grows into a plant, a line grows into a picture, a word into a poem. There are many kinds of drawing, but in this context it is useful to think of drawing as a means of locating attention-in-process. The drawing line relates the present to the trace of the past and the future. For the act of drawing to be drawing and yet not to grow into a picture, it must have neither continuity nor destiny. The line must be full of interruptions and resumptions: it must shape itself without a goal in mind. Oppen wants us to read *Discrete Series* as if it were just such a kind of drawing, or drawing out of meaning. Each page ends with an interruption of meaning and opens with a resumption: the ‘Paper, turned, contains/ This entire volume’. If we read ‘volume’ as a synonym for book, we may wonder how the turned page can contain, in the sense of epitomise, the whole collection? In this confusion the pun—a rather obvious one—becomes strikingly apparent: ‘This entire volume’ is our entire volume as we turn the page in our own time and space. This also describes what this entire volume is about: namely, the experience of a series of perceptually discrete events. It contains parts that are not directed towards the growth of a whole picture but, paradoxically, to locating us within the forces of dislocation. Oppen was interested in saying only what could be said with conviction, a conviction that rested upon the nominalist notion that the only statements that

had validity were those that could be related to perceptions of material existence.⁷

Oppen continually denies the illusion of continuity:

As I saw
 There
 Year ago——
 If there's a bird
 On the cobbles;
 One I've not seen
 (*DS*, 24: *CPGO*, 10)

This poem scrupulously points out an often forgotten fact: you may see 'As I saw', but what you see will always be different. This has implications for the way in which we construct history. If we exist in a discrete series of present moments how can we speak with any certainty about the past? Oppen condenses this question into an image:

Civil war photo:
 Grass near the lens;
 Man in the field
 In silk hat. Daylight.
 The cannon of that day
 In our parks.
 (*DS*, 23: *CPGO*, 9)

The moment in which the photograph was taken and the present moment in which the cannon is observed may be physically discrete, and yet the coexistence of the document

⁷ Oppen later stated in reference to *Discrete Series*: 'the chief problem was simply that of honesty. What I couldn't write I scratched out. I wrote what I could be sure of, what I *could* write. . . what I could think, could say, could do'. L.S. Dembo, 'Oppen On His Poems: A Discussion', *George Oppen: Man and Poet*, p. 204.

and the cannon asserts the validity of believing in continuity. Oppen risks no more than this: he asserts a belief in the fact of the past, but refuses to determine what it may mean. Oppen treats the interiority of other people with a similar mixture of belief and uncertainty:

From this distance thinking toward you,
Time is recession

Movement of no import
Not encountering you

Save the pulse cumulates a past
And your pulse separate doubly.
(*DS*, 26: *CPGO*, 10)

The lovers exist separately in time and space, and no encounter takes place between them ‘Save the pulse cumulates a past’. This curious qualification suggests that through attending to one’s own pulse one may physically empathise with the existence of another; a suggestion that recalls Forrest Anderson’s lines: “‘the body preceded the Word’/ yours contains mine’ (*OA*, 159). Instead of gazing at the moon and imagining the distant lover also to be gazing at it, Oppen feels his own pulse and feels hers through it. The pulse, so to speak, becomes the apex of the compass’s wandering foot, a materialist’s equivalent of the mingled soul. However, this physical empathy lives only as long as the pause at the end of the line break, for with the resumption of the verse-line the pulse becomes a sign that in their separate existences they accumulate discrete pasts.

*

H.R. Hays reviewed a batch of Objectivist Press publications, including *Discrete*

Series, in the June/ July 1934 issue of *Hound and Horn*. Of Oppen's work he wrote, his,

pretentiousness is not supported by any felicity of observation. Pound wishes to establish a difference between Oppen and Williams. Williams is intent on capturing the object as a whole; Oppen is apparently trying to derive textures of objects. The comparison is unfavourable to Oppen.⁸

In fact Pound did not describe the nature of the distinction he discerned between Oppen's and Williams' work— this was Hays' interpretation. Nevertheless, Hays' observation is useful for a number of reasons. It may indicate that the visual aesthetic in poetry ('felicity of observation'), was now a widely held, even dominant, aesthetic: beside the visual brilliance of Williams, Oppen's mix of sculptural and visual 'textures' are deemed of less value. Hays also implies, by describing Williams as 'intent on capturing the object as a whole', that Oppen fails to achieve this representational enclosure of the thing. It is quite possible to argue that Williams, at this point in time, was himself trying to name things without 'capturing' them. Setting that to one side, Hays' suggestion that Oppen had not achieved a total, essential description of the object was accurate. What Hays failed to understand, however, was that this perceived failure was a deliberate tactic in a wider ethical strategy.

This poem from *Discrete Series* exemplifies many of these issues:

Party on Shipboard

⁸ H.R. Hays, 'Nothing but the Truth', *Hound and Horn*, 7 (1934), 738.

Wave in the round of the port-hole
 Springs, passing,—arm waved,
 Shrieks, unbalanced by the motion——
 Like the sea incapable of contact
 Save in incidents (the sea is not
 water)
 Homogeneously automatic—a green capped
 white is momentarily a half mile
 out——
 (DS, 17: CPGO, 8)

Compare this with a passage of description from Williams 1928 collection *Descent of Winter*:

10/22

that brilliant field
 of rainwet orange
 blanketed

by the red grass
 and oilgreen bayberry

the last yarrow
 on the gutter
 white by the sandy
 rainwater

and a white birch
 with yellow leaves
 and few
 and loosely hung

and a young dog
 jumped out
 of the old barrel
 (*Exile*, 4, 34-35)

Williams' 'felicity of observation' is painterly in the way that it precisely identifies the

colours of the objects it names. For instance, the isolation of 'rainwet orange' allows the reader to make a comparison between the colour words that compose the poem's 'picture' of the world, and the colours that, in a painting, are arranged so as to compose the image. Williams and Oppen share a desire to foreground the linguistic materials with which they work. However, the way in which they design the syntactical and rhetorical relationships between their notations is distinct. The 'ands' that proliferate towards the end of Williams' poem imply that it is simply, as in Oppen's poem, describing a random succession of incidents; a succession into which the dog accidentally leaps. With closer consideration, however, these juxtaposed elements chart the movements of an eye searching for similar items of visual information: the process of perception is guided by a specific plan. Williams has selected a series of images that reveal the lingering life-force present in the vegetation of the old year; the image of the *young* dog jumping out of the *old* barrel is simply the moment at which he chooses to make that organised process of looking clearly explicit. As a consequence of this final image the objects previously referred to become the metaphorical vehicles of an unstated, but nevertheless discernible, tenor— life-in-process.

By contrast, Oppen's poem frustrates the reader who seeks to resolve the perceptual information provided into a metaphorical structure capable of co-ordinating its significance. Indeed, such is the degree to which Oppen enforces our sense of disconnection between each perception (so that each remains only a perception), that his poem threatens to break up into a list of unrelated, or infinitely relatable parts: 'Springs, passing, —arm waved,/ Shrieks, unbalanced by the motion—'. Oppen appears to distrust the metaphorical operations of syntax, grammar and rhetoric that in Williams' poem allow

the 'red grass' to be described as *blanketing* a field. This is perhaps because of the predatoriness of the description: the notion of blanketing brings with it a host of associations. However, Oppen's poem does make general factual comments like, 'The sea is a constant weight/ In its bed' (*DS*, 17: *CPGO*, 8), which counterpoints the poem's notation of instability. This kinetic information is typical of Oppen's sculptural sensibility. He regularly extends the mind into the stresses and strains of the forces that work on and through objects. The spareness of Oppen's verse allows this shift between the act of notating perception and the application of extant knowledge to the object to become apparent. Any larger metaphorical connection between the random evidence presented and the concept might have obscured the different ways that these uses of language relate us to the world.

If there is an organising idea unifying the parts of Oppen's poem, it is one dedicated to showing us how general concepts are precariously balanced on the sea of chaotic evidence; a use of the sea's physical properties that echoes its metaphorical function in Zukofsky's "'A"1-7'. Indeed, the party-goers seem to imbibe the tumultuous, Dionysian influence of the sea: 'They pass, however, the sea/ Freely tumultuous.' (*DS*, 17: *CPGO*, 17) Is it the sea or the party goers who are 'Freely/ tumultuous'—or are they both of one energy? Oppen uses the line break to suggest this without enforcing an essential Dionysian unity between the two. Oppen's words follow the eye of the poem's notional observer as it is attracted by successive happenings: 'Homogeneously automatic — a green capped/ white is momentarily a half a mile/ out.' According to these observations there is simply a sameness, a non-human lack of volition out there in the world, in the chaotic space where the concept discovers, imposes and relinquishes order. This is what Oppen keeps central

in his poem: we are incapable of ‘contact/ Save in incidents’, and yet through language we can uncover patterns of relationship between random incidents that allow the growth of a provisional knowledge. While it can be argued that both Williams and Oppen are concerned with elemental energies, they organise our relationship to them quite differently.

Oppen’s distinctiveness derives from his emphasis on the ‘incident’ rather than Zukofsky’s ‘historical and contemporary particulars’, or Pound’s ‘luminous details’. According to the OED an incident is, ‘Something which occurs casually in connection with something of which it forms no essential part; a subordinate or accessory event.’ By contrast, a particular is, ‘A part or section of a whole’. In other words, an incident demands no other direction of attention than towards itself, but a particular, as it has its particularity predicated on the existence of a hidden whole, both directs attention towards itself and towards a bigger picture, or gestalt. In these terms, Oppen appears to diverge from the Poundian adaptation of the Chinese ideogram: he does not structure the evidence he presents in such a way that it may lead us towards a definite common-denominator or stabilising concept.⁹ Oppen’s notion of the poem as an act of continually interrupted drawing confirms this sense that he was trying to avoid the reduction of notated perception to a unit or switch within a predetermined argument. However, while the relationship between evidence and meaning is more precarious in Oppen’s poetry, he does organise his incidents into patterns that are more than simply random, or expressions of randomness, as we shall see.

⁹ For a summary of Pound’s understanding and application of the Chinese ideogram see. Ezra Pound, *ABC of Reading* (London: George Routledge Ltd, 1934, rpt, London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1961), pp. 17-27

In the early 1930s, both Zukofsky and Williams drew comparisons between their particular process of seeing and a utopian state of being:

On that morning when everything
 will be clear,
 Greeting, myself, Rimbaud
 with glasses,
 The world's earth spread a rose,
 rose every particle,
 The palm of the hand lie open
 earth's lily,
 One will see
 gravel in gravel
 Stray bits
 of burnt matches
 Glass,
 disused rubber,
 Scrape heels of shoes,
 and not trip,
 Not that one will get, see,
 more than particulars.
 (OA, 140)

In the dawn of the first day after the revolution Zukofsky will see things clearly. However, Zukofsky's clear vision does not reveal Oppen's incidents, but interconnected particulars. He describes the open hand as 'earth's lily', a comparison that suggests the human hand to be as fragile and beautiful as a lily and as dependent on the earth for its sustenance. In other words, we are being asked to see the hand as part of an organic whole. Further on in this passage Zukofsky describes a state in which the imagination will no-longer seek to compare one thing with another, 'gravel' will be seen 'in gravel'; the object will wholly occupy and satisfy the mind. In which case, does seeing 'gravel in gravel' mean that the revolutionary subject has transcended language and apprehended the immanent being of the object? All that can be said for certain of this moment of seeing 'gravel in gravel' is

that Zukofsky has filled both parts of the simile with the same term: thoughts about gravel are compared with thoughts about gravel. So while Zukofsky juxtaposes the open hand with a lily stimulating a comparison, in this passage he tries to keep the referential gesture of each word precise. Zukofsky uses our perceptual relation to the world as a litmus for revolution. His ideal clarity of vision is predicated upon a perfected state of being that knows itself inextricable from the process of matter, and as a consequence possesses the respect necessary for coexistence within a naturally organised and non-predatory utopian community. In 'A Morning Imagination of Russia', Williams is more explicit about the relationship between clarity of vision, perfected being and a utopian social order:

The very old past had been refound—
 redirected. It had wandered into himself
 The world was himself, these were
 his own eyes that were seeing, . . .
 (*OA*, 109)

Williams' fantasy of revolution is accompanied by the recovery of an imagined primordial unity between the self and the external world. Zukofsky does not go as far as to make this union the goal that he seeks, for he acknowledges that the self cannot escape itself and become wholly 'other'. Williams' opposes his notion of perfected existence with the capitalist ego, which both partitions the world and turns it into a possession, and turns the self into a partitioned, abstracted and distracted possession. 'Russia' is the place where partitions are broken down and primordial being is recovered. It can occur anywhere: 'Cities had faded richly/ into foreign countries, stolen from Russia—' (*OA*, 109).

Despite their differing degrees of optimism, or perhaps philosophical

sophistication, both Zukofsky and Williams define their revolutionary goal as a way of seeing and being in the world: this is the ideal. Williams offers a vision of the world *after* class conflict has subsided. However, there are radical messages and models for action inherent in these paradigmatic definitions of being: ‘these were/ his own eyes that were seeing’. The thought that one might see through someone else’s eyes, while imagining that one is seeing for one’s self, introduces the question of the degree to which vision, and more principally the gaze of desire, might be manipulated by the language and ideology it carries. The journey towards utopian being involves removing successive veils of inherited ideology, but where should one stop? Does a point arrive when the individual recognises that he or she is seeing with his or her own eyes. In Williams’ poem, the end of the dialectical struggle of history brings about a no less ideologically informed primordial condition of being. As the set of codes that constitute the bourgeois self are exposed, so another set of values, no less constructed are naturalised. The main difference is that the self is now concerned with realising its social obligations.

Where Williams is prepared to describe his utopia as a simple union of self and world, Oppen is more sensitive to the effects that language has on perception:

The edge of the ocean,
 The shore: here
 Somebody’s lawn,
 By the water.
 (*DS*, 20: *CPGO*, 9)

Initially, it appears that each line presents a new perception, with the aim being to define the scale of the ‘lawn’ (a human territory/possession), within the unbounded, non-human

situation of the 'shore' and 'ocean'. However, on closer study this apparently simple poem is, in fact, a little more complicated. Rather than presenting new evidence through each line, it describes the same evidence differently: 'The edge of the ocean' is surely also a 'shore', and the 'ocean' is also 'water'.¹⁰ Each designation provides a different perspective, so that, because of the simplicity of the poem, it becomes apparent that language and perception cannot be unbound from each other: how we describe things alters how we perceive them. It might also be the case that how we perceive an object is shaped by the material context in which it is perceived: could the diminution of 'ocean' to 'water' be a result of its proximity to the lawn—as though the tamed space of the lawn had exerted its influence on the ability of the observer to see the ocean as ocean? This speculation may seem more likely when considered in the context of the poem that precedes it: in 'Party on Shipboard' it is stated that the '(the sea is not water)'.

*

Oppen's and Zukofsky's techniques for the eviction of the reader's fantasies of authorial intention, and for focusing the reader's attention on the linguistic object, can be interpreted as analogous to Marx's theory of commodity fetishism and emphasis on material vision:

Through this substitution, the products of labour become commodities, sensuous things which are at the same time supra-sensible or social. In the same way, the impression made by a thing on the optic nerve is perceived

¹⁰ Andrew Crozier has made a similar reading of this poem in his excellent essay 'Inaugural and Valedictory: The Early Poetry of George Oppen', in *Modern American Poetry*, ed. R.W. (Herbie) Butterfield (London and Totowa, NJ: Vision and Barnes and Noble, 1984, rpt 1986), pp. 149-150.

not as a subjective excitation of that nerve but as the objective form of a thing outside the eye. In the act of seeing, of course, light is really transmitted from one thing, the external object, to another thing, the eye. It is a physical relation between physical things. As against this, the commodity-form, and the value-relation of the products of labour within which it appears, have absolutely no connection with the physical nature of the commodity and the material relations arising out of this. It is nothing but the definite social relation between men themselves which assumes here, for them, the fantastic relation between things. In order, therefore, to find an analogy we must take flight into the misty realm of religion. . . I call this the fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labour as soon as they are produced as commodities, and is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities.¹¹

Marx contrasts the way in which the material thing physically imprints itself on the retina of the observer and the fetishistic aura of its 'value-relation'.¹² He distinguishes between a perceptual connection with material body of the object, and the way in which one relates to the value an object has as a means of exchange. It is possible to see this dichotomy reflected in Objectivist writing in at least two ways: firstly, their poems try to notate the material encounter between the eye of the perceiver and the object; and secondly they try to encourage readers to concentrate on the way in which their own eyes encounter the material form of the poem either spoken out loud or laid out on the page. Both these actions, which were intended to prevent 'hallucination', can be seen as an attempt to counteract the 'fantastic relation between things' that follows on from the production and exchange of a commodity. Williams' 'A Morning Imagination of Russia' is the most obvious example of the utopian, 'prelapsarian' character of Marx's material vision in *An*

¹¹ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. I, introd. by Ernest Mandel, trans. by Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin Books, 1990), p. 165.

¹² For another reading of the Marxist significance of Oppen's 'photographic' aesthetic see Hugh Kenner, 'Oppen, Zukofsky, and the Poem as Lens', in *Literature at the Barricades: The American Writer in the 1930s*, eds. Ralph F. Bogardus and Fred Hobson (Alabama: The Univ. of Alabama Press, 1982), pp. 162-171.

as Williams' post-revolutionary visionary senses no interval to exist between himself and the world, she is perceived to have no 'interval of manner', no 'accent': her body is wholly 'in the sun' and signifies nothing but its own physicality. When reading *Discrete Series*, it is important to watch out for the way in which prepositions position things in the world in different ways, as each preposition carries a different ontological nuance. Perhaps the use of 'in' was unavoidable, but it connects with the notion that she excels, and is more 'bare' than, 'The fitting of grasses'. This unlikely, even comical comparison, suggests that she, like the grass, is both perfectly functional and fitted into place. She may also be as bare as the word 'that'. The poem shifts us from this reflexive, demonstrative pronoun to another pointed thing: 'Pointedly bent, your elbow on a car-edge'. This controlled shift, if plausible, is a good example of how, despite his nominalist precision, Oppen uses techniques of a Zukofskian character to let us know that we are reading in and through a verbal object. The comparison of this woman to grass also implies that she is natural. Oppen's alignment of her body with nature reaches a climax in the poem's closing conceit in which she said to be 'Incognito as summer/ Among mechanics.' She is summer in disguise, and as unrecognised in her summeriness as summer may pass unrecognised by busy mechanics.

In the original setting of *Discrete Series* the preceding poem was faced with a portrait of unnatural womanhood:

'O city ladies'
Your coats wrapped,
Your hips a possession

Your shoes arched
Your walk is sharp

Your breasts
 Pertain to lingerie

The fields are road-sides,
Rooms outlast you.
(*DS*, 31: *CPGO*, 12-13)

As in 'A Morning Imagination of Russia', the city is associated with artificiality and the commodity. The second line, 'Your coats wrapped', may indicate that these women have their coats wrapped around their bodies (it may, less obviously, indicate that the coat itself is wrapped up). This description of the coat as a form of wrapping may bring with it connotations of gift-wrapping: i.e. that it supplies a fetishistic aura of desirability to these women's bodies. The poem goes on to judge that they treat their hips as 'a possession', which may lead us to infer that they are being treated as form of sexual commodity. Whereas the woman in the facing poem has an 'unaccented' face, the women in this poem walk with a 'sharp' accent. Their bodies 'Pertain to lingerie'. 'Pertain' denotes, along with the simple notion of relatedness, that their bodies are possessed by their clothes. In other words, they are defined by their clothing, and not only that, they are cut off from the four-dimensional material world as a consequence of their fascination with the value of their appearances: in this poem 'fields' are reduced to 'road-sides'. Those interested in surfaces are only capable of seeing edges, never depth. In these two poems the feminine body becomes the site of moral and ethical conflict. There are natural and unnatural women, good women and bad, and the difference between the two can be discerned according to their appearance and manner. There appears to be no room in this moral analysis of appearance for seeming one thing and being another. In the light of this

judgemental seeing, Oppen's ethical assertion of the otherness of other human beings ('Who come is occupied' (*DS*, 16: *CPGO*, 7)) becomes more problematic.

As these minimalistic poems make no direct reference to Marx's theories, the connection I have established between the theory of the fetishised commodity and material vision, and the art/nature dialectic that runs through *Discrete Series*, may still appear tenuous. But then Oppen's poems guide us towards conclusions through the minimal moral inflections he adds to the evidence submitted in his poems:

Thus
Hides the

Parts—the prudery
Of Frigidaire, of
Soda-jerking—
(*DS*, 9; *CPGO*, 4)

Marjorie Perloff and other critics have noted that this is a reference to the concealed cooling element situated on top of the 1930s Frigidaire refrigerator.¹³ The machine has had its working mechanism concealed for aesthetic reasons. Its functioning parts, as it were, are made to 'pertain' to its styling. Oppen's use of the word 'prudery' and his description of the cooling element as hidden 'Parts' suggests that those who styled the refrigerator were in some way ashamed of showing its mechanism; as if that mechanism had a sexual significance. In this poem Oppen implies that 'big-Business' (*DS*, 9; *CPGO*, 4) wants to conceal the messy functional parts of life, not just for the élite, but now for the mass-

¹³Tom Sharp writes, 'the working parts of Frigidaire's refrigerators are hidden within aerodynamically designed curves of white enamel': in 'George Oppen, *Discrete Series*, 1929-1934', in *George Oppen: Man & Poet*, p. 283. See also Marjorie Perloff, *Radical Artifice*, pp. 79-82.

market. This spare and functional poem, which deliberately exposes its own functioning parts, may offer the refrigerator as a metonym for a dishonest system in the process of extending itself into every part of life.

Oppen, like Zukofsky, was concerned with that other great consumer durable, the car. What did this quintessential signifier of modernity, rapidly multiplying in numbers, disclose about the values of the culture that produced and used it?

Nothing can equal in polish and obscured
 origin that dark instrument
 A car
 (Which.
 Ease; the hand on the sword-hilt
 (*DS*, 10: *CPGO*, 4)

If the original purpose of the ‘Frigidaire’ was to keep things cool, one might suppose that the idea of the car originated in the desire to move people more swiftly. Is it the case, then, that this original need, which the car should have expressed through its function, has been obscured by the accentuations of decoration? This was, after all, the era of ‘streamlined’ design. The word ‘polish’ may work synecdochically for all that is polished on a car—the chrome, glass and leather work—details that signified, in the 1930s car-market, the modernity and luxuriousness of the product. How the lines, ‘(Which./ Ease; the hand on the sword-hilt’, are related to the car, either escapes explanation, or requires the construction of a link that spans the intrusive linguistic interruption of the emphatically isolated word ‘(Which.’ It is possible to read ‘(Which.’ as the final word trailing off the interrupted phrase beginning, ‘Nothing can equal. . .’. One could even wonder over

time passes—a false light.
(*DS*, 15: *CPGO*, 6)

In this poem the car is ‘closed’. It separates any one who inhabits its from the space outside. In the context of the poem beginning ‘O city ladies’, this gives the car’s appearance a negative value, as if the space inside were a possession that possessed the possessor; a space capable of alienating the individual from the four-dimensional material world. Curiously, the driver is said to be ‘between glasses’, which presumably means that he is enclosed between the windowed sides of the car. The strangeness of this description does two things: firstly it emphasises that, while these windows allow the eyes to gaze out, they in fact form a solid material barrier between the observer and the world; and secondly, it defamiliarises the object and helps to establish the sense that this poem tries to observe human progress from an alien, unknowing, and elemental perspective. One gets the sense that the poem is trying to cast the eye of language over the object with the unhuman indifference of altering light. However, this stylisation of the void’s perspective is coupled with a distinctly moral and logical intelligence, as we shall see. From this exterior perspective the ‘unapplied’ car gives no indication of its reason for existence; it is as purposeless in the same way that one might say a stone is purposeless: it is simply a ‘thing among things’. However, unlike a stone, when idle the surface of this car is an ‘overstatement’, and ‘Hardly an exterior’: from which comments one might infer that for the observer the car signifies (or states) more than it acts out, and as a correlative of this disparity loses the material quality of exteriority. This weakening of its exterior may be related to the light reflected off its polished windows and surfaces—surfaces that, as we have seen, have been given a negative value. The judgemental activity of this poem

becomes more explicit as it reaches its close, but does not reveal the criterion according to which it arrives at its true/false statement. However, as is hopefully becoming apparent, it is possible to deduce Oppen's epistemological and ontological categories. Oppen is judging the car on two levels; by what it signifies (states) about itself and its quality of material being. When applied the car becomes 'less strange', in other words it explains its existence. This positive realisation, or solidification, of the car's material form through action, is qualified by the way in which its surfaces interact with the light, and by the way in which, though it may reveal its solidity for the observer, the car deprives the figure within of a sense of the exterior world. This is the only way I have been able to understand how light, which has been associated with the otherness of natural forces surrounding and entering the city, can become 'false light'. While one could simply say that the car is used to reflect the metaphorical 'light of the times' (which happen to be false), there is enough evidence to suggest that the car itself, according to the observer's judgement, infects the neutral otherness of light with its false being and significance: it provides an incidental origin for the generalising metaphor.

The poem beginning 'Closed car' is matched, on the opposing page in *Discrete Series*, with a poem that describes a boat. This poem is the only one that survived from the 1932 group. The revisions made for its republication involved only minor changes of lineation, and the removal of its numbering and sub-title 'IV CATBOAT'. By cutting the number, Oppen rectified the contradiction of having a poem numbered according to a predictable mathematical series (i.e. $x+1$), in a group of poems bearing the title 'Discrete Series'. A discrete series, as Oppen described later, is a 'series of terms each of which is empirically true', i.e. generated according to reference to objects external to the series and

(*Poetry*, 256-257: *DS*, 7: *CPGO*, 3).¹⁵ Oppen's poem constructs a process of seeing and kinetic sensing that plots a vertical line through space. It locates the body of the observer within the coordinates of a man-made structure; a structure whose extent is made all the more prominent by virtue of its existence within the un-marked elemental space of the ocean. The notion of the boat gliding over 'unrimmed holes' emphasises the dialectical relationship between boat and sea-space developed in this poem. Where a boat may have rimmed port-holes, the sea-bed has 'unrimmed holes'; the sea is everything that the boat is not, and *vice versa*. And yet the sea-bed can only be known in terms of the negation of the boat; in other words its otherness can only be measured against the known.

If the boat provides the subject with a structure through which he or she can engage with space and natural forces, then it becomes possible to draw an analogy between its functional, open structure, and the action of simple referential language. Later in the collection another poem offers the opportunity to make this connection:

O what O what will
Bring us back to
Shore,
the shore

Coiling a rope on the steel deck
(*DS*, 34: *CPGO*, 13)

The vocative 'O' and repetitions have an almost melodramatic quality in the context of *Discrete Series*' studied understatement. The question these words pose is answered. I

¹⁵ In the first published version of this poem, included in the February 1931 issue of *Poetry* (256-257), 'window-glass' is not split over two lines; a difference that lessens the tension between the visual penetrability 'window', and the physical obstruction created by the glass.

would argue, by the simple referential action of the language used in the final line of the poem: as rope may secure a boat to the shore, so language, used to indicate a thing without any emotive or metaphorical embellishment, may return 'us' to the common shores of material experience. While we may not agree upon what words like 'beauty' or 'truth' point us towards, we, who know the uses of words, know what 'rope' points at and can tell from the reaction of others that they know this too. It is through this empirical testing of the function of words which we have agreed to use in a certain way, that our co-existence is ratified and the boundaries of solipsism, if not physically overcome, are at least overcome by faith in the evidence of other beings.

*

Discrete Series points the reader towards an ethical system it refuses to state explicitly. While Oppen emphasises the otherness of the object and implies that objective knowledge is impossible, he is nevertheless allows himself to make true/false propositions predicated on its appearance. He aligns practicality and functionality with naturalness. An object whose form matches its function 'declares' its origin and purpose in its material shape. Such objects are open, authentic and explicit. The antitheses of these values can be summarised in two terms: artfulness and decoration. In this period of economic emergency, luxuriousness possessed connotations of bourgeois decadence, and perhaps as a consequence Oppen associates them with the dark shadow of the lie. His particular art/nature dialectic depends on the belief that human-beings and man-made things are justified only through their productive actions. This ethic extends from a basic epistemology and ontology that could be summarised in this way: a thing can only truly be

known in terms of what it does. In other words, being-in-action and meaning are contingent. When an object looks like it will do a task that it cannot actually perform there occurs a discrepancy between being and meaning, and as a consequence the object's meaning and being become obscure. In the context of Oppen's emphasis on the precise description of the process of perception, it would be hard for Pound to level the accusation that Oppen had lost a sense of 'language as language'. As has been shown, Oppen takes a step away from his early linguistic experiments and moves towards the construction of a relation between language and things that is neither 'slushy' nor 'inexact'. He retains the reflexive gesture in his poetry in order, occasionally, to point out that the evidence presented by the poem is being mediated by the values implicit in the language of the poem. There is no direct access to the thing itself even if a poem may appear to present things simply and clearly. It is possible to see Oppen's increased precision within the context of Pound's alignment of precise naming and good government discussed in chapter two. However, the function of Oppen's dual emphasis on referentiality and the materiality of the text is never explicitly put in the harness of such an ambitious, totalistic ethical system: its purpose is more open to interpretation. One could argue that it is simply designed to guide us towards moments of ecstatic wonder over the presence of ourselves in the world, and to promote a respect for its otherness. How we might construct a social system in which such experiences and relations are allowed to develop is left open to suggestion.

CONCLUSION

It would take another dissertation to describe how each of the writers I have considered in this study developed after their association with Zukofsky's Objectivist project. Instead of identifying their various responses to the possibility of a social revolution receding, and to the increasing inability of the USSR propaganda machine to mask Stalin's brutality, I am going to summarise my discoveries through a very brief consideration of the continuing relevance of the 'Objectivist' aesthetic. I am going to limit the scope of these final remarks to the work of Oppen and Zukofsky, as, to my mind, their work epitomises most clearly the relationship between music and vision, reflexivity and referentiality, that this thesis has explored.

On first hearing Oppen's later poems I felt as if I were being returned to a world I had experienced but not known how to describe. After three years of studying the Objectivists it is still the particular way in which Oppen's poetry reintroduces me to the material world that matters to me. A line such as, 'Pride in the sandspit wind this ether this other this element all' (*CPGO*, 205) still communicates the awe of being *in* and *of* the moving elemental world. The absence of punctuation and the heaping of the demonstrative pronouns re-creates the fluent struggle to find words adequate enough to describe the experience. It records and recreates a moment in which, as Oppen puts it elsewhere, 'the pure joy/ Of the mineral fact' (*CPGO*, 148) bubbles up because the meaning of the elemental world is ultimately 'impenetrable' (*CPGO*, 148) and 'other' to the facts that may predict it. The only fact becomes the fact of the world's and the observer's recurrent and irrefutable existence—a realisation that creates a kind of sublime moment of unsteadiness and awe, and calls forth a faith in the existence of the external world. Oppen's poetry

contains many such small ecstasies, or openings, that happen when consciousness suddenly realises the strangeness of its presence in the world and the strangeness of its co-existence with other people:

Phyllis—not neo-classic,
The girl's name is Phyllis—

Coming home from her first job
On the bus in the bare civic interior
Among those people, the small doors
Opening on the night at the curb
Her heart, she told me, suddenly tight with happiness—

So small a picture,
A spot of light on the curb, it cannot demean us
(*CPGO*, 154)

Why should the smallness of the event cherished in this poem 'demean us'? Why does Oppen preface his description of the primal encounter with the otherness of the 'sandspit wind' with the word 'Pride'?— an unlikely emotion given the lack of self-reflection that occurs in his poetry. These instances suggest a psychological economy of shame and resistance, in which pride operates as a counteractive measure. Oppen's pride indicates that there should be no shame in accepting small, discrete, luminous occurrences as 'all' there is. With a more affirming tone he reiterates Reznikoff's teaching expressed in poem 'LXVII' of *Jerusalem the Golden*:

The sun shining on the little waves of the bay, the
little leaves of the hedge—
with these I school myself to be content.
(*Jerusalem*, LXVII, 20)

Such small incidents only become shameful if we accept the teaching of mythologies that attribute the partial nature of our perception and knowledge to our own failings; failings which caused our fall from ideal existence—‘Of this was told/ A tale of our wickedness. / It is not our wickedness.’ (*CPGO*, 147) Oppen transforms this negative reading of the limits of our knowledge, by offering the perception of discontinuity as the source within which the foundation of existence may be ecstatically re-encountered.

In Oppen’s poetry, seeing ‘this ether this other’ involves a journey to the ‘outer/ Limit of the ego’ (*CPGO*, 205). This does not culminate in self-transcendence, but an act of imaginative transformation and re-vision. It yields a position of conceptual quietness from which to view the ‘city of the corporations/ Glassed/ In dreams/ And images—’ (*CPGO*, 148). This perspective, first offered in *Discrete Series*, is of continuing importance. Now, more than ever, it is difficult to get beyond the glass and dreams of late capitalism and contact, nakedly, the primordial spaces of the ocean, the ether and the plateau beyond ‘The asphalt edge’ (*DS*, 16; *CPGO*, 7). It is difficult to see beyond the array of desires and life-styles we are encouraged to buy into and act out; difficult to have an ‘authentic’, fundamental experience of existence. Oppen asks us to reach back to this origin, but considers that we are ‘unable to begin/ At the beginning’; we are condemned to be ‘shoppers,/ Choosers, judges’ (*CPGO*, 156). Of course this is a rather sweeping judgement, and if we were to accept Oppen’s critique of our competitive and appetitive culture there would be no competitive sports (*CPGO*, 156). One might also legitimately question the possibility of returning to this origin, and to a state of unknowing, credulous awe. However, whether or not one believes it possible to be illuminated by the otherness of the world does not matter as much as the fact that in seeking out this contact we

defamiliarise the world and the values we are asked to accept unquestioningly. This vision may not be as difficult to achieve as it sounds. To see a bottle of perfume (perhaps washed up on a beach) for what it is—gold paint, frosted glass, ‘an image’ constructed through advertising—is to repeat the Objectivist act of defamiliarisation and to expose ourselves to the opportunity to reevaluate the values of our culture: ‘There is a discarded supermarket cart in the ditch/ That beach is the edge of a nation’ (*CPGO*, 217). Oppen teaches that we may see ourselves more clearly from the existential and physical margins of ourselves and our culture.

Like Oppen, Zukofsky also continued to question what we know and how we know it. In “‘A’22”, (which, along with “‘A’23”, are to my mind the most delightful and inventive works in Zukofsky’s oeuvre), he writes:

fish purl in the weir:
 we are caught by our
 own knowing, barb yellow hard
 every yet—*oink* little jangler
 thrum—sigh, prattle sea-flood—
 (“A”, 510)

This stanza contains the typical Zukofskian shift from imagistic language to the materialisation of the sign; from the referential transparency of ‘fish purl in the weir’, which catches our knowing momentarily, to the uncertain relationships between the words ‘barb yellow hard/ every yet’ etc. Zukofsky helps us to give ourselves the slip in the act of reading. He offers us the opportunity to immerse ourselves in the semiotic possibilities of ‘thrum—sigh, prattle sea-flood—’. The significance of our world, determined as it is

by the language we use to describe it and ourselves, suddenly becomes more uncertain, more obviously constructed. Zukofsky unweaves our identities. He uses language to help us liberate ourselves from the fetters of language; to help us recognise our own otherness to the many discourses of the 'self'. As the image of the fish in the weir breaks up into the 'prattle' of words it as if are being slipped into a semiotic stream in which our energies of attention and interpretation are allowed to 'purl'; which is to my mind reason enough for reading Zukofsky.

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