

THE WESLEYAN CENTENNIAL EDITION  
OF THE COMPLETE CRITICAL WRITINGS OF LOUIS ZUKOFSKY

Volume I

*A Test of Poetry*

Volume II

*Prepositions +*

# PREPOSITIONS +

*The Collected Critical Essays*

LOUIS ZUKOFSKY

Foreword by Charles Bernstein

Additional prose edited and introduced  
by Mark Scroggins

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## FOREWORD

"A"

a poem of a life

—and a time. The poem will continue thru 24 movements, its last words still to be lived. Bach is a theme all thru it, the music first heard in 1928 affecting the recurrences or changes as may be of the story or history.

After 40 years of the writing and still with it, it is easier to say *here it is* than explain what seems to me to be clear. It comes to as I have said elsewhere (somewhat differently):

*not to fathom time but literally to sound it as on an instrument and so to hear again as much of what was and is together, as one breathes without pointing to it before and after. The story must exist in each word or it cannot go on. The words written down — or even inferred as written over, crossed out — must live, not seem merely to glance at a watch.*

L. Z.

2/25/67

## Interview

[This interview was conducted by L. S. Dembo on May 16, 1968, in Madison, Wisconsin, and was published in *Contemporary Literature* 10.2 (Spring 1969): 203-219, as part of "The 'Objectivist' Poet: Four Interviews." I have changed page references for Zukofsky's poems from *ALL: The Collected Short Poems* to the more recent *Complete Short Poetry* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).]

Q. I know that "objectivism" was short-lived as a movement, if it ever existed at all, but your essay in the February 1931 issue of *Poetry* does seem to suggest a particular way of looking at reality. In fact, you actually use the term nominalism in connection with André Salmon. Wouldn't you say that your own poems from the beginning attempted to get away from normal generalization and theme to present an experience of the object or of nature directly?

A. Well, I don't want to get involved in philosophy. I might as well say that *Bottom: on Shakespeare* was written to do away with all philosophy. Naturally you can't do it without getting involved in their blasted terminology. In the first place, objectivism . . . I never used the word; I used the word "objectivist," and the only reason for using it was Harriet Monroe's insistence when I edited the "Objectivist" number of *Poetry*. Pound was after her; he thought the old rag, as he called it, was senile, and so on. He had had his fights with her; he couldn't get across the people he wanted, and in one of his vituperative letters he told old Harriet the magazine would come to nothing, that there was this youngster who was one of the best critics in America . . . well, I'm remi-

niscing. In any case, Harriet was fond of Pound and after all she was enterprising. Well, she told me, "You must have a movement." I said, "No, some of us are writing to say things simply so that they will affect us as new again." "Well, give it a name." Well, there were pre-Raphaelitism, and dadaism, and expressionism, and futurism—I don't like any of those *isms*. I mean, as soon as you do that, you start becoming a balloon instead of a person. And it swells and a lot of mad people go chasing it. Another word I don't want to use is "reality." I try to avoid it; I use it in *Bottom*, I think, only because I had to quote some text. Occasionally, a really profound man—a Cardinal Newman, for example—can use the word; there isn't any word you can't use if you have enough body to make something of it. Anyway, I told Harriet, "All right, let's call it 'Objectivists,'" and I wrote the essay on sincerity and objectification. I wouldn't do it today. (I've sworn off criticism after *Bottom*, after nineteen years of going through all that.) In any case I wouldn't use the same terminology anymore. But looking back at that essay, and as it was revised in *Prepositions* . . . what I did in this volume of criticism was to get it down to the bare bone. Granted that there are certain infelicities of style in the original. Actually, I don't think I changed ten words in editing the collected criticism. I omitted a great deal though, and that made all the difference.

But let me explain what I meant by "sincerity" and "objectification." Any artist lives with the things as they exist. I won't go into the theory of knowledge. I don't care how you think about things, whether you think they are there outside of you, even if you disappear, or if they exist only because you think of them. In either case you live with things as they exist. Berkeley's table that exists only in the mind, Plato's table that couldn't exist without the idea of a table, or Aristotle's table that was a table because you started with wood and had a purpose to make something for the good of society—you're still talking about a table. The theory of knowledge becomes terribly dull to me unless somebody like Wittgenstein, who really saw what the word game was, writes about it. Then it becomes very moving, because of the life, the fact, that goes on in your head no matter how evaporated the body becomes, no matter how much "gravity" you have (what Laurence Sterne defined as the mysterious carriage of the body to betray the defects of the mind).

But getting back to sincerity and objectification: thinking with the things as they exist. I come into a room and I see a table. Obviously, I can't make it eat grass. I have delimited this thing, in a sense. I call it a

table and I want to keep the word for its denotative sense—as solid as possible. The only way it will define itself further will be in a context. In a way it's like grammar; only grammar is more abstract. In traditional grammar, you start with a *subject*. "I'm going to talk about *that*," says Aristotle. "What are you going to say about *it*?" "Well, what *can* I say about *it*?" says Aristotle: "*It is, it exists, or it acts, or sometimes you hit it on the head and it seeks an action, a change in voices as we call it. Grammar is that kind of thing. The object is. Now what objects aren't?*"

To the human being with five senses . . . (How many more is he going to get when he goes up there beyond gravity? Probably lose them all.) Some senses are more important to some people than to others. To the cook, I suppose taste and smell are the most important; to the musician, hearing (the ear); to the poet, all the senses, but chiefly, sight (the eye)—Pound said we live with certain landscapes. And because of the eye's movement, something is imparted to or through the physical movement of your body and you express yourself as a voice.

Let's say you start with a body, the way a kid does when it's born, and it cries almost immediately. It takes a long time for its eyes to focus, a month I suppose. But anyway, the eye concerns the poet; the ear concerns the poet because he hears noises, and like the kid he's affected. And you can do all sorts of things with the noises. You can imitate natural things, and so forth. I like to keep the noises as close to the body as possible, so that (I don't know how you'd express it mathematically) the eye is a function of the ear and the ear of the eye; maybe with that you might feel a sense of smell, of taste even. So much of the word is a physiological thing. I know all of the linguists will say I'm crazy. In fact I think there's a close relationship between families of languages, in this physiological sense. Something must have led the Greeks to say *hodor* and for us to say *water*.

But the word is so much of a physiological thing that its articulation, as against that of other words, will make an "object." Now you can make an object that is in a sense purely image and, unless you're a great poet, it can get too heavy. You will become one of those painter-poets who are, really, too frivolous; they exist in every generation. You know, they look at something and immediately want to write a poem. That's not the way to make an image; it ought to be involved in the cadence—something very few people realize. What I mean is the kind of thing you get in Chapman's "the unspeakable good liquor there."

Obviously, the man who wrote that knew what it was to gargle something down his throat. So body, voice, in handling words—*that* concerns the poet.

The last thing would be, since we're dealing with organs, the brain or intellect. That's very abstract. The parallel in physics would be the gaseous state. Now gas exists, but it is awfully hard to write the gas-stuff unless you have a very clear mind.

The objectivist, then, is one person, not a group, and as I define him he is interested in living with things as they exist, and as a "wordsmen," he is a craftsman who puts words together into an object.

I tried in *A Test of Poetry* to show what I meant by giving examples of different poets writing—colloquially, not philosophically speaking—on the same subject. People are free to construct whatever table they want, but if it's going to be art, you had better have some standards. I at least want a table that I can write on and put to whatever use a table usually has. Well, this is all the answer to one question, and I don't really like to discuss these things . . . .

Q. Please go on.

A. Well, I'd prefer a poem that embodied all I have said here, a poem which said them for me, rather than the criticism. They say my poetry is difficult. I don't know—I try to be as simple as possible. Anyway, I have a poem that shows what I've been talking about, "The Old Poet Moves to a New Apartment 14 Times" [*Complete Short Poetry*, pp. 222-224]. Let me read some of it:

The old poet  
moves  
to a new apartment  
14 times

1

"The old radical"  
or surd—

2

*I's* (pronounced *eyes*)  
the title of his last

followed by *After I's*.  
"After"—*later* or  
chasing?

3

All the questions are answered with their own words . . . .

[Interrupting:] What was your question?

Q. "All the questions are answered with their own words." Why don't you continue?

A. All you have to do is say "yes" or "no." That's about all we have ever done as far as action is concerned. The trouble is most people just won't be that definite. [Continues reading:]

All the questions are answered with their own words  
intellect the way of a body a degree "before"  
soughed into them

[Commenting:] I'm thinking of boiling off water so that it becomes vapor.

if the words say silence suffers less  
they suffer silence  
or the toy of a paradox  
a worth less worth  
than that *shall* will be said  
as it is

[Commenting:] There is something that exits and the "shall," well, I don't know; it's up to the scheme that seems to be running everything, God, whatever you want to call it.

*Aleatorical indeterminate*

[Commenting:] Are we determined or not determined?

to be lucky and free and original  
we might well be afraid to think  
we know beforehand exactly  
what we're doing

[Commenting:] It sometimes helps not to know "exactly," and no one knows exactly. How can he know "exactly"? I think we might as well be honest about that.

rather let it happen

but the 'illogical' anticipation,  
music, has always been explicit  
as silence and sound have

[Commenting:] What have you? What does this art consist of? Well, with poetry as with music, I go on, with silence and sound, "how long is a rest to rest." All right, according to John Cage, sometimes it's all silence. You want it that way? Doesn't make very much *sense* to me. I don't see why you should call it music. Maybe it is. That's the intellect part of it. John Cage is an intellect; I think that's the trouble with him. Otherwise, he's very wonderful, does some marvelous "things" to evoke silence.

in the question  
how long is a rest to rest.

In the 'old' metered poetry  
the Augustan proud of himself  
jingle poet as he says it

freedom also happens  
tho a tradition precounts

[Commenting:] He may think he's writing a line in iambic pentameter, but is he? Does he control every bit of it? It's a question: are you going to write by chance? Are you going to be absolutely rational about it? All conventional poetry . . . poets have the idea that they're in complete control of what they're doing. Sometimes it happens that the jingle poet has a marvelously metrical line that somebody else may do consciously for that effect. Or he can't help himself; it's in the language that two stressed syllables will come together. He's already determined by the speech that exists. It's one of the functions that the poet, if he's entirely honest, will realize.

freedom also happens  
tho a tradition precounts

but someone before him  
is counting for him  
unless it happens

that the instant has him  
completely absorbed in that someone:

[Commenting:] Sometimes you may like Shakespeare so much you may, as Emerson says, turn out to be as good as Shakespeare for a minute.

a voice not a meter

[Commenting:] That's what I'm emphasizing.

a voice not a meter  
but sometimes a meter's a voice.

[Commenting:] Sometimes you discover what you think is a measure and it's the same as that objectivist voice. And it's nothing "new"—that is, hankering for the *new* in the sense of *novelty*. I'd say this of Chaucer, of Wyatt at his best. You can't carry the poetic object away or put it in your pocket, but there is a use of words where one word in context defines the other and it enriches so that what is put over is somebody's reaction to existence. That's all I was going to say.



Q. What about the relation between "sincerity" and "objectification"?

A. Sincerity is the care for the detail. Before the legs of the table are made, you can see a nice top or a nice grain in the wood, its potential, anyway, to be the complete table. Objectification is the structure. I like to think of it as rest, but you can call it movement. I cut out things from the original essay because I wanted to avoid all the philosophical jargon. Actually, looking back at it, it wasn't bad for a guy of twenty-five or twenty-six; it's certainly clearer than parts of Whitehead. I don't mean the mathematical Whitehead; I couldn't even kiss his toe there. I don't know whether it was as good as Peirce . . .

Q. Concerning the phrase, "thinking with the things as they exist," doesn't one man make them different from another, or doesn't what existence means to one man differ from what it means to another?

A. That's true. But I'm thinking of only one person, the poet. Anyway, there's a certain amount you've got to get across to the next man or there's no sense in talking about art—we'll have bedlam. If you're talking about art, you want to give it to at least one person—that's your audience. Otherwise, unless you're talking to yourself, you probably set up a person. I mean, if we can't agree that this is a table, then, all right, you can use it to sleep on, but you're messing up uses. I'd say the business of writing is to see as much as you can, to hear as much as you can, and if you think at all to think without clutter; then as you put the things together, try to be concise.

Q. Well, what is involved in thinking without clutter? I don't think it's as simple as it seems to be.

A. It depends on how long or how deeply you've lived; after all, it's thinking or, if you wish, sensing with the things as they exist. I said in the essay—perhaps it isn't explicit—that it depends on the depth of the person. Everybody, some time in his life, wants to write poetry for reasons that have nothing to do with poetry. A kid falls in love and he wants to write a poem; it might turn out to be a good one simply because he's so innocent. But it's not likely. That is, if you want to be a

good carpenter, you either know something about your craft or you don't. Each poem is in a sense its own law; I mean the good poem always is and there's no other like it. But if you're talking about at least a minimum of human value, humane value, you better have some kind of standard, especially if you're going to be true to your language, if you really want to affect people, and so on.

Q. Still, doesn't the "clear physical eye" see in a different way from the eye working with the brain or influenced by abstractions? For example, there's a poem in *All* that goes:

Not much more than being,  
Thoughts of isolate, beautiful  
Being at evening, to expect  
at a river-front:

A shaft dims  
With a turning wheel;

Men work on a jetty  
By a broken wagon;

Leopard, glowing-spotted,  
The summer river—  
Under: The Dragon:

[*Complete Short Poetry*, p. 22]

It seemed to me the poet here was seeing as an objectivist, in terms of particularities rather than wholes. He seems to be literally thinking with the things as they exist and not making abstractions out of them.

A. But the abstract idea is particular, too. Every general word is particular, *as against another*—glass, table, shoe, arm, head . . . "reality," if you wish. Individually they're all, apart from their sound, abstract words. I'd like to keep them so that you don't clutter them with extra adjectives, extra adverbs; the rest is just good speaking. It might turn out to be crabbed rather than being glib, but if you're good, maybe you'll be blessed by some grace. But this poem is an example of what happens if you deal mostly with sight and a bit of intellect.

Q. Yes, that's what I meant. And doesn't this mean that the poet sees in terms of individual details—with "sincerity," in your sense?

A. But it all mounts up. I suppose there's a general statement: "Not much more than being," whatever that is. The opposite would be non-being. And then I go ahead and say a little more about it; that being becomes isolate being, a beautiful being. These are all assertions. Where is this? That's the first tangible thing, a river-front; the one I saw was probably the Hudson or the East River. But the point is that the river-front becomes more solid-as against the general flow of intellect in the beginning. The first part is intellectual, "gaseous"; the second part would resemble the "solid" state.

Now what kind of being? There is a shaft with a turning wheel; there are men on the jetty, and a broken wagon. It could have been a good wagon, but I wanted it to be broken. And above this, the sky. So actually I suppose the guy who was doing this was trying to get the whole picture, instead of saying as a "romantic" poet, "Now I'm seeing, now I'm being; I see the jetty; this wagon was once pretty."

What really concerned me in these early poems was trying to get away from that kind of thing—trying to get away from sounding like everybody else. We are all dealing with the same things. Someone makes a table, a bad one; someone makes one that is new and hopefully not to be thrown out the next day.

Q. Where do the leopard and the dragon fit in?

A. That's the constellation. "Leopard, glowing-spotted, / The summer river— / Under: The Dragon."

Q. Why do you refer to the constellation?

A. There I'm . . . I'm not for metaphor, unless, as Aristotle says, you bring together unlikes that have never existed before. But they're in words; they're in verbs: "the sun rises." My statements are often very, very clipped.

Q. Well, the colon in the last line after "Under" would seem to imply that the dragon is under the river.

A. "Summer river— / Under: . . ." There is a question of movement and enough rest; notice the space after "Under." The dragon is also reflected in the river—inverted. Of course, that kind of thing has already been done by Mallarmé—not that I knew as much Mallarmé then as I do now.

Q. Well, to continue this matter of seeing, it seems that many of your poems—for example, "Immature Pebbles"—are based on "the unsealing of the eyes bare," as you put it in "her soil's birth." Isn't this kind of vision associated with what you have called the "spontaneous idea," which seems to be the mental activity that corresponds to "thinking with the things as they exist"?

A. Yes. I would hope so. All poetry is that. Suddenly you see some thing. But what was I doing in "Immature Pebbles"? [Thumbing to the page and looking at it (*Complete Short Poetry*, pp. 41–42):] I start with a quote from Veblen. "*An Imponderable is an article of make-believe which has become axiomatic by force of settled habit. It can accordingly cease to be an Imponderable by a course of unsettling habit.*" Well, this was Veblen's way of writing; it amuses me sometimes. But it was always very difficult. Actually, Veblen was the kind of man who'd give you a bag of bees and walk off. All right, I started out with that: an imponderable is an article of make-believe and it's associated with settled habit, the ordinary, the mundane, and so on. The only thing is to unsettle it. This particular spring, in the poem, happens to be the kind of thing that you see on any beach, but I observed very particular things. Notice that the spring is still too brisk for water suds, and I've even defined it, "bathers' dirt."

(All you can say about this poem is . . . it doesn't even have to be me, but the person will result from the poem. That's why I think it's useless to try to explain one's poetry. Better that it explain itself after the poet is gone. One way of its explaining itself is by your reading what's there:  $2+2=4$  does not say  $2+2=5$ . Now where the difficulty may come in is that sometimes you get an equation that is so condensed, it is good only for the finer mathematician. I don't say that to compliment myself, but, you know, mathematicians have standards of fineness; the more condensed the equation, the "nicer" it is.)

Well to go on, "ripples / make for . . . An observer's irrelevancy of April." May follows. Obviously, he's not very happy about it because it is "objectless / of inconsequence" and brings "the expected to the accus-



tomed / in this place." How happy can it be? Obviously, this man who is looking at the "shivering" bathing suits and "the mandrill's blue and crimson / secret parts" is looking at things the "wrong" way and he wants to get away from the scene. But at the same time he has rendered it, "In our day, impatience / handles such matters of photography / more pertinently from a train window." I think you can gather that the man who wrote this poem isn't interested in photographing people bathing on a beach. That's it.

All right, is it as good as Seurat's painting? It may have rendered as much as Seurat in words. Obviously, Seurat was happier with his points of paint than I was with my words. But I've certainly rendered much of these "immature pebbles," in the sense that one may give another the (perhaps undesirable) gift of a *table*. These kids are pebbles; they're a part of nature, they're "nice," but I'd rather see them through a train window. I didn't want to make a photograph and yet I did. It's an ironic poem, but irony is one of the ways of saying things. I prefer singing to this type of thing, but there it is.

Q. I wonder whether you'd mind also commenting on "Mantis," and the poem interpreting it [*Complete Short Poetry*, pp. 65-73]. You seem to be concerned here with the *sestina* as the ideal expression of the "battle of diverse thoughts" or associations arising in the poet's mind upon his encounter with a mantis.

A. I never said it was the *ideal* form of expression. You have to be careful with this sapless guy, you know. Actually, I was trying to explain why I use the *sestina*, and there are a lot of old forms used. I suppose there are two types of natures. One is aware of the two-hundred-year-old oak, and it's still alive and it's going to have some use to him; the other one is going to say cut it down and build a supermarket. I'm not inclined to be the latter, nor do I want to imitate a traditional form, but if that thing has lasted for two hundred years and has some merit in it, it is possible I can use it and somehow in transferring it into words—as I said in "*Aleatorical indeterminate*"—make something new of it. And the same for the form of the *sestina*. Musicians have done that with fugues; there are some today who try to do counterpoint or traditional harmony, but most won't even talk in that terminology. Ultimately it'll come down to silence or sound, words or no words. And where are you going to get them? Where does language come from? Are you just going to make it out of

a mouthful of air? Sometimes, but most of the time you don't; there's a world already there; it might be a poetic form that is still useful.

Now the so-called "modern" will say you cannot write a *sestina* anymore, that Dante did it and it's dead and gone. But every time I read Dante, it's not dead. The poet is dead, but if the work is good, it's contemporary. There's no use in writing the same *sestina* as Dante, because in the first place, you couldn't do it, except by copying it word for word and believing it's yours—an extreme case. What is possible is that L. Z. or somebody else could write something as good as it. Well, Williams came along and said, "No, we've got to get a new poetic foot," and while he did some wonderful things instinctively, I wish he had omitted some of the theory. Pound was more sensible. What kind of meters can you have? Well, what you've had throughout the history of poetry: you can count syllables, or your language is stressed and so you will count accents, or else you have a musical ear and know when so much sound approximates so much sound and there's a regularity of time. You want to vary the time or have no time signatures . . . whatever the case, it'll have to hold together. So there's no reason why I shouldn't use this "old" form if I thought I could make something new.

"*Mantis, An Interpretation*" is an argument against people who are dogmatic. On the other hand, I point out that as it was written in the nineteenth century (and some "contemporaries" are nineteenth century), the *sestina* was absolutely useless. It was just a facility—like that of Sunday painters, who learn to smear a bit of oil on canvas. They're not Picasso; Picasso has used every form you can think of, whether it came from Greece, Crete, or Africa. But what I'm saying in "*Mantis, An Interpretation*" is not that the *sestina* is the ideal form; rather that it's still possible. Williams said it was impossible to write sonnets. I don't know whether anybody has been careful about it. I wrote five hundred sonnets when I was young and threw them away. Then I wrote "A"-7 and a *canzone*, which is quite different from the sonnet, as Pound pointed out. A very intricate form.

Q. I didn't mean to imply that the *sestina* was the ideal form of expression *per se*. I thought that for the particular experience that the poet was having with the mantis on a subway, his undergoing a process of "thought's torsion," the *sestina* was most appropriate.

A. Someone else might have done it differently, but for me that's

what it led to. I have that kind of mind. Somehow, you know, the thing can become kind of horrible—to connect a thing with everything. But how can you avoid it? And it's not that I want to be long-winded; I want to be very concise. And when I've done it the long way, as in *Bottom*: *on Shakespeare* or "A", which is unfinished, then I want to make it very short. For anybody who is interested in the theory of knowledge, which is done away with in *Bottom*, here is the short way of doing it:

I's (pronounced eyes)

Hi, Kuh,

those

gold'n bees

are I's

eyes,

skyscrapers.

[*Complete Short Poetry*, p. 214]

A man can't help himself, any more than Shakespeare could help himself, from saying the same things over and over. The idea is to say them so that people always think you're saying something new. Not that I'm always conscious that I'm doing it. It isn't that I have this concept in my head, that I must say *this*. God knows, when I was through with doing away with epistemology in *Bottom* . . . (And I don't see why Wallace Stevens ruined a great deal of his work by speaking vaguely about the imagination and reality and so on. He can be a wonderful poet, but so much of it is a bore, bad philosophy.) I was trying to do away with all the things the Hindus avoid by saying, as in "A"-12: "Before the void there was neither / Being nor non-being / Desire, came warmth, / Or which first? / Until the sages looked in their hearts / For the kinship of what is in what is not." They had no trouble with non-being, you see.

I said solid state, liquid, gas; as a matter of fact you can word it sense, essence, non-sense. As to the handling of words, there are the words of *sense*. Then, there are words that generalize and say "without this that thing can't be essence." So you have words like truth and reality. The "real" is bad enough, but at least it's a voice, a kid saying, "For

real?" But then the philosopher adds the "i-t-y" and you start playing all kinds of word games and that's non-sense. You can get lost, really lost. But the Hindu knew that all these things existed. They do exist and sometimes you want to record it. So much for epistemology. When I'm sick of it, thoroughly sick of it, I handle it in this way. It was *enough* that I wrote five hundred pages of *Bottom*.

Q. What do you mean, you got rid of epistemology in *Bottom*? The work seems to me to be all epistemology.

A. "The questions are their own answers." You want to say "yes," say "yes"; you want to say "no," say "no." It's a useless argument. Well Wittgenstein . . . he was the kind that wondered why anybody should bother to read him. As at the beginning of "I's (pronounced eyes)" . . . the *haiku*—everybody's writing *haiku*. You remember Elsie, Borden's cow? That's what I meant, and I greeted her up on the sign there: "Hi, Kuh." "Those / gold'n bees / are I's." Obviously some apparition or vision. She's up there anyway and the golden bees . . . I don't know, she makes honey. The bees are also "eyes." You were wondering which "eyes" see. On the other hand, suppose, without my glasses, I look out at the tower—"those / gold'n bees / are I's, / eyes, / skyscrapers": all I see is Christmas crystallography. It's wonderful, but absolutely astigmatic.

All right, the epistemological question? I see this? Yes. The eyes see it? But there's also an object out there. All right, whichever way you want.

Q. Where does the idea of love fit in? It seems to be the chief theme of *Bottom*.

A. Well, it's like my horses. If you're good enough to run or feel like running, you run. If you want to live, you love; if you don't want to live, you hate, that's all. It's as simple as that. It's like being and non-being again—just different words for states of existence.

Q. The horses in "A"-7 don't have any manes.

A. Oh, those particular horses are sawhorses. They don't have any manes. Oh, I see what you're after. I don't think that way, though.

When I say they don't have any manes, that's all I mean. It's like the old song, "Yes, We Have No Bananas."

Q. But you say these sawhorses are also words—so they're not just sawhorses.

A. Then if I say that, they are words. I use words for them; how can I get them across except in words? I say "sawhorse"; otherwise they'd better speak for themselves. That's a case of objectification. There are the sawhorses. All right, somebody can look at them and not bother with them. They interested me. But I wanted to get them into movement because I'm interested in the sound of words. So I got them into movement. Of course, in "A"-7 I have also talked about words, what to do with words.

"A" is written at various times in my life when the life compels it. That also means that my eye is compelling something or my ear is compelling something; the intellect is always working with words. Being a certain creature with my own bloodstream, etc., I will probably, unless I discover something new to interest me or something worthwhile to write about, probably repeat many things. All art is made, I think, out of recurrence. The point is to have recurrence so that it isn't mere repetition, like Poe's "Bells, bells, bells, bells." The idea is to have these recurrences so that they will always turn up as new, "just" different. Something has happened to the movement or you see the thing "differently." Now this business of words occurs in the first movement, "A"-1, and though I'd like to forget it, I must say this: I think that too much of our literature is about the craft of literature. Two great faults I'd like to avoid, but unfortunately I'm among men—I live in my times . . . The other fault is pretension to learning. How can they all know so many things? By the time I'm eighty I hope to be very simple, if I haven't shut up.

Q. Yet there is a great deal of erudition in *Bottom*, isn't there?

A. I never looked at it as erudition. These were the things I read, and I've probably read very little compared to most people. I don't consider myself a scholar. These are the things I've read, the things I've loved. You've asked about love before. I suppose love means if you do something, that's love; otherwise you don't do anything. There can be, I suppose, a purely passive kind of love. I'm certainly not proud of

the erudition. On the other hand, notice that much of the citation of Shakespeare is edited, not because of presumption, but because I wanted to show off the good things.

Q. [Student:] I've been reading the French poet, Ponge, who's extremely interested in words and objects, too. And Sartre, in a little essay on Ponge called "Les Mots et les choses,"<sup>1</sup> mentions that he feels Ponge participated in a kind of crisis of language between 1918 and 1930, and that he was trying to make a word an object like the objects he saw. I was wondering whether you felt that you also participated in a crisis of language, a kind of devaluation of words.

A. Well, things happen, you know, in one's time. I've read some of Ponge and recently Cid Corman printed a good deal of him, at any rate a notebook. He's trying to write a poem in the old-fashioned style about pines, so that it will turn out to be like something by Valéry or Hérédia—the Parnassians or the post-Parnassians, something like that. And no, he felt these *things*; they were, of course, botanical things. (Incidentally, I wish that instead of studying philosophy I had studied some botany.) One of the nice statements that Ponge makes is that the poet who falsifies the object is an assassin; instead of calling the object what it is, this kind of poet develops grand metaphors and all the "baroque" curlicues. Well, I suppose you get to a time where worlds apart two people might be doing similar things. The work itself, of course, is different. Ponge is consistently concerned with botanical objects, just to describe pine needles, for instance. On the other hand, will they—the pine needles—help him? The one line about pine needles in the *Cantos*—the feeling of the redness of the pine needle in the sun—does what Ponge doesn't succeed in doing in that notebook at all, though I admire what he is after. It's certainly more worthwhile than attempting another imitation of Baudelaire. I mean either you show that you're alive in this world, in making something, or you're not.

Q. Would you mind commenting on "A"? Do you conceive of the poem as having an overall structure?

1. [The student has misremembered the title of Jean-Paul Sartre's 1945 essay "L'Homme et les choses," collected in *Situations I* (Paris: Gallimard, 1947) 226-270. *Les Mots et les choses* is the title of a 1966 book by Michel Foucault (translated as *The Order of Things*).]

A. I don't know about the structure of "A". I don't care how you consider it, whether as a suite of musical movements, or as something by a man who said I want to write *this* as I thought I saw the "curve" of it in twenty-four movements, and lived long enough to do so. I don't know, how would you consider Mahler's *Song of the Earth* or something like that? No, I didn't think of Mahler. I simply want the reader to find the poem not dull. As I said on another occasion, not anxious to say it then: "Written in one's time or place and referring to other times and places, as one grows, whatever ways one grows, takes in, and hopes to survive them, say like Bach's music." Maybe you get that out of it; maybe it will make its music. I feel a curve or something like that. But in working it out . . . it's the detail that should interest you all the time.

I feel that life makes the curve. That's why Williams kept adding to *Paterson*; he found he had more and more to say and that it was all part of the poem. (You know, the poet is insatiable. I could go on talking forever.) Otherwise, you get down to the old argument, there is no such thing as a long poem; there are some good lines, and so forth. Maybe, I don't know. A long *poem* is merely more of a good thing, shall I put it that way? So the nice thing is, for instance, that Pound's *Cantos* are still coming out. I hope he isn't crazy devoting so much time to the idea that they charged six-percent interest in Pisa, and how wonderful it was. No—rather "Imperial power is / and to us what is it? / The fourth; the dimension of stillness." That's the great Pound. Or in a very late canto, "When one's friends hate each other / how can there be peace in the world?" And with that I leave you.