LOUIS ZUKOFSKY
(1904–1978)

The man whose work Robert Creeley would call a bridge between the Modernist poetry of the 1920s and the experimental poetry of the 1950s learned to bridge cultures from an early age. The son of Jewish immigrants from Lithuania, Louis Zukofsky was born on Manhattan's Lower East Side and initially spoke only Yiddish, learning English in elementary school. Although he soon rebelled against his parents' Orthodox faith, their work ethic and family devotion became central components of his poetry, both in his unstinting dedication to literature and as recurring themes. Despite the financial burden, his parents sent him to Columbia University, where he studied philosophy and English, graduating in 1924 with a master's degree in English. The poetry he wrote during his college years was accomplished enough to appear in *Poetry* magazine. At Columbia he also began reading the work of Karl Marx, and although Zukofsky never joined the Communist Party, Marx's ideas about class, economics, and materialism would deeply influence his poetry.

By 1926 Zukofsky had thoroughly schooled himself in Modernism, displaying his skills in his ambitious "Poem beginning 'The.'" Zukofsky not only built his poem on Modernist techniques such as fragmentation and collage, but styled it as both a parody of *The Waste Land* and an assertion (pitted against Eliot's anti-Semitism) of Jewish identity. In 1927 Zukofsky took the bold step of sending the poem to Ezra Pound, who published it in his journal, *Exile*. The correspondence that developed between Zukofsky and Pound, who was then living in Italy, grew into a lifelong friendship that was strained at times due to Pound's anti-Semitism but remained productive for both writers. Zukofsky apprenticed himself to Pound so studiously that some readers consider his work too derivative. But Zukofsky differentiated himself from his mentor by developing a Marxist, Jewish perspective and by taking Modernist quotation, rapid juxtaposition, and concern with language even further than Pound—using language abstractly as a system like music or mathematics, so that composition became a matter of arrangement (especially of quoted material) that highlighted the building blocks of the system, such as prepositions, articles, and sonic patterns.

Pound was so impressed with Zukofsky's skill and intelligence that he persuaded Harriet Monroe to allow the young poet to edit the February 1931 issue of *Poetry*. Zukofsky included his own verse, along with work by William Carlos Williams, George Oppen, Carl Rakosi, and Charles Reznikoff—the group who was thereafter loosely associated with the name Zukofsky gave to the issue: "Objectivist." At Monroe's request, Zukofsky also wrote an essay that indicated the poets' shared concerns, "Sincerity and Objectification: With Special Reference to the Work of Charles Reznikoff," which Zukofsky later revised, merging it with two other early essays, and retitled "An Objective." Opening the essay with a definition that links poetry with optical precision, Zukofsky stressed poetry's need to register the concrete particulars of a world embedded in history. He also drew attention to a poem's identity as an object: a thing made of words.

Although some critics have questioned Objectivism's provenance as a legitimate school of poetry (Zukofsky later claimed that he only created a movement at Monroe's request), there is no doubt that the essay articulated his own aims for poetry. His view of poetry—and even of language itself—as contingent upon history and as a material thing, an object that exists in and of itself, arose from his Marxist perspective. During the course of his career, he worked assiduously to develop the implications of these ideas in numerous volumes of verse, most notably his dense book-length poem "*A*," which he began in 1928 and completed in 1974; in experimental translations from Catullus; and in criticism. Much of Zukofsky's work is formalist in the strictest sense possible; for example, he bases a section of "*A*" on a careful count of "n" and "r" sounds, and his translations from Catullus aim for sonic accuracy, rather than accuracy of meaning. Yet he was also capable of moving lyricism, as in the 1945 elegy for his mother, "A Song for the Year's End."

Apart from teaching at the University of Wisconsin from 1930 to 1931, Zukofsky spent his life in New York City. From 1935 until 1942, he worked for the Federal Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration (WPA), and in 1947 he began teaching English at the Polytechnic Institute of Brooklyn, where he remained until his retirement in 1966. After ending an affair with the Wisconsin poet Lorine Niedecker, with whom he remained close friends, in 1939 he married Celia Thaew, a musician and composer, whose work became increasingly important to his poetry. Zukofsky's *Autobiography* (1970) consists almost entirely of her musical settings of his short poems, and the last section of "*A*" features her settings of his poetry and prose to Handel's *Harpsichord Pieces*. Their only child, Paul Zukofsky, was a violin prodigy who debuted at Carnegie Hall in 1956, at the age of thirteen.

The son's fame stood in stark contrast to the father's obscurity, for as Zukofsky aged, he became increasingly reclusive and resentful of his lack of recognition, despite the homage he received from a diverse array of younger poets, including Creeley, Charles Olson, Denise Levertov, Allen Ginsberg, and Robert Duncan. After Zukofsky's death in 1978 his influence increased. Language Poets such as Ron Silliman and Lyn Hejinian acknowledge him as an important forerunner of their work. Although his poetry is not widely read, Zukofsky's ideas have exerted considerable influence on mid-century and contemporary American poetry.

AN OBJECTIVE

I

An Objective: (Optics)—The lens bringing the rays from an object to a focus. That which is aimed at. (Use extended to poetry)—Desire for what is objectively perfect, inextricably the direction of historic and contemporary particulars.

It is understood that historic and contemporary particulars may mean a thing or things as well as an event or a chain of events: i.e. an Egyptian pulled-glass bottle in the shape of a fish or oak leaves, as well as the performance of Bach's *Matthew Passion* in Leipzig, and the rise of metallurgical plants in Siberia.

Omission of names is prompted by the historical method of the Chinese sage who wrote, "Then for nine reigns there was no literary production."

None at all; because there was neither consciousness of the "objectively perfect" nor an interest in clear or vital "particulars." Nothing—neither a new object nor the stripping of an old to the light—was "aimed at." Strabismus may be a topic of interest between two strabismics; those who see straight look away.

II

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 a line of melody. Shapes suggest themselves, and the mind senses and receives awareness. Parallels sought for in the other arts call up the perfect line of occasional drawing, the clear beginnings of sculpture not proceeded with.

Presented with sincerity, the mind even tends to supply, in further suggestion, which does not attain rested totality, the totality not always found in sincerity and necessary only for perfect rest, complete appreciation. This rested totality may be called objectification—the apprehension satisfied completely as to the appearance of the art form as an object. That is: distinct from print which records action and existence and incites the mind to further suggestion, there exists, though it may not be harbored as solidity in the crook of an elbow, writing (audibility in two-dimensional print) which is an object or affects the mind as such. The codifications of the rhetoric books may have something to do with an explanation of this attainment, but its character may be simply described as the arrangement, into one apprehended unit, of minor units of sincerity—in other words, the resolving of words and their ideation into structure. Granted that the word combination "minor unit of sincerity" is an ironic index of the degradation of the power of the individual word in a culture which seems hardly to know that each word in itself is an arrangement, it may be said that each word possesses objectification to a powerful degree; but that the facts carried by one word are, in view of the preponderance of facts carried by combinations of words, not sufficiently explicit to warrant a realization of rested totality such as might be designated an art form. Yet the objectification which is a poem, or a unit of structural prose, may exist in a line or very few lines. The mind may conceivably prefer one object to another—the energy of the heat which is Aten to the benignness of the light which is Athena. But this is a matter of preference rather than the invalidation of the object not preferred. It is assumed that epistemological problems do not affect existence, that a personal structure of relations might be a definite object, or *vice versa*.

At any time, objectification in writing is rare. The poems or the prose structures of a generation are few. Properly no verse should be called a poem if it does not convey the totality of perfect rest.

It is questionable, however, whether the state of rest achieved by objectification is more pertinent to the mind than presentation in detail: the isolation of each noun so that in itself it is an image, the grouping of nouns so that they partake of the quality of things being together without violence to their individual intact natures, simple sensory adjectives as necessary as the nouns.

The disadvantage of strained metaphor is not that it is necessarily sentimental (the sentimental may at times have its positive personal qualities) but that it carries the mind to a diffuse everywhere and leaves it nowhere. One is brought back to the entirety of the single word which is in itself a relation, an implied metaphor, an arrangement, a harmony or a dissonance.

The economy of presentation in writing is a reassertion of faith that the combined letters—the words—are absolute symbols for objects, states, acts, interrelations, thoughts about them. If not, why use words—new or old?

III

The several definitions of *An Objective* and the use of this term extended to poetry are from the sixth movement of "A". The lines referred to read:

> The melody, the rest are accessory—
> . . . my one voice; my other . . .
> An objective—rays of the object brought to a focus,
> An objective—nature as creator—desire for what is objectively perfect,
> Inextricably the direction of historic and contemporary particulars.

Assuming the intention of these lines to be poetry, the implications are that a critic began as a poet, and that as a poet he had implicitly to be a critic.

A poet finds the continuously present analysis of his work preferable to criticism so-called. Yet what other criticism exclusive of his poem seems permissible? In preference to the brands of circumlocution requisite to ponderous journals, a "prose" criticism whose analysis follows without undue length of misinterpretation the more concise analysis of a considered poem seems permissible, if the general good demands such a prose. The direction of this prose, though it will be definition, will also be poetry, arising from the same source or what to a third reader might seem the same source as the poetry—a poetically charged mentality. Though perhaps gratifying to the poet whose poem is under observation—this prose, with all its poetic direction and right impetus, should, to the critic himself with his merely poetically charged mentality, seem secondary even tertiary and less; i.e. compared with that act which is a poem.

This essay originally appeared, in a different version, in *Poetry* Feb. 1931. Collected in *Prepositions: The Collected Critical Essays* (London: Rapp and Carroll, 1967) 12–18.

The graceless error of writing down to those who consciously want something else from poetry—not poetry—as some stay for their own vanity; to "sometimes" think that minds elaborately equipped with specific information, like science, must always confuse it with other specific information, like poetry. That may be the case with unfortunates. The point, however, would be not to proffer solemnly or whiningly confusions to the confused, but to indicate by energetic mental behavior how certain information may be useful to other information, and when the divisions which signalize them are necessary.

Such a process does not need to be accurately painful; rather it should be painlessly complete—as certain people are complete and ready to go anywhere but to the doctor.

Certainly the more precise the writing, the purer the poetry—and going back to the critic, he should know what pure poetry is. Or we shall never know how to dispose of our sensations before we begin to read poetry, or how to raise them to honesty and intelligence—as well as—those of us who are precisely afflicted—to that precision of style, we should do well to cultivate.

A poem. A poem as object—And yet certainly it arose in the veins and capillaries, if only in the intelligence—Experienced—(every word can't be overdefined) 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—

Homer's *the wet waves* not our *the wet waves* but enough association in the three words to make a context capable of extension from its time into the present. Because, there is, though meanings change, a linguistic etiquette, a record possibly clear to us as the usage of a past context—The context as it first meant—or if this may not be believed—an arrived-at equilibrium—or at least the past not even guessed by us arrived at an equilibrium of meaning determined by new meanings of word against word contemporarily read.

A poem: a context associated with "musical" shape, musical with quotation marks since it is not of notes as music, but of words more variable than variables, and used outside as well as within the context with communicative reference.

Impossible to communicate anything but particulars—historic and contemporary—things, human beings as things their instrumentalities of capillaries and veins binding up and bound up with events and contingencies. The revolutionary word if it must revolve cannot escape having a reference. It is not infinite. Even the infinite is a term.

Only good poetry—good an unnecessary adjective—is contemporary or classical. A standard of taste can be characterized only by acceptance of particular communication and concerned, so to speak, whenever the intelligence is in danger of being cluttered, with exclusions—not with books but with poetic invention. The nothing, not pure nothing, left over is not a matter of "recencies," but a matter of *pasts*, maybe *pasties*.

It would be just as well then dealing with "recencies" to deal with Donne or Shakespeare, if one knew them as well as a linguistic usage not their own can know them. And yet contexts and inventions seem to have been derived from them.

One can go further, try to dissect capillaries or intelligent nerves—and speak of the image felt as duration or perhaps of the image as the existence of the shape and movement of the poetic object. The poet's image is not dissociable from the movement or the cadenced shape of the poem.

An idea—not an empty concept. An idea—its value including its meaning. The desk, i.e. as object including its value—The object unrelated to palpable or predatory intent—Also the meaning, or what should be the meaning of science in modern civilization as pointed out in Thorstein Veblen.

No predatory manifestation—Yet a manifestation making the mind more temperate because the poem exists and has perhaps recorded both state and individual.

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. Yet criticism would hardly be different if musical notations or signs were used instead of words. Example: any piece of original music and the special criticism it produces.

The components of the poetic object continued:

Typography—certainly—if print and the arrangement of it will help tell how the voice should sound. It is questionable on the other hand whether the letters of the alphabet can be felt as the Chinese feel their written characters. Yet most western poets of consequence seem constantly to communicate the letters of their alphabets as graphic representations of thought—no doubt the thought of the word influences the letters but the letters are there and seem to exude thought.

Add—the core that covers the work of poets who see with their ears, hear with their eyes, move with their noses and speak and breathe with their feet. And yet lunatics are sometimes profitably observed: the core that is covered, the valuable skeptic knows, may in itself be the intense vision of a fact.

Intention must, however, be distinguished from accomplishment which resolves the complexity of detail into a single object. Emphasize detail 130 times over—or there will be no poetic object.

Or put the job of explanation up to cabinet-making: certain joints show the carpentry not to advantage, certain joints are a fine evidence; some are with necessary craftsmanship in the object. The first type—showing the carpentry not to advantage—is always present in a great deal of unnecessary writing; the second and third are rare; the second—which is a fine evidence—is rare to this time; the third—which with necessary craftsmanship is hid in the object—is, whenever craftsmanship is present, characteristic of this time.

"Recencies?" No more modern than a Shakespearean 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.

In contemporary poetry three types of complexity are discernible: 1—the swift concatenation of multiple references usually lyrical in movement—almost any

poem by Donne, for example; 2—the conceit—Shakespeare's "when to the sessions," his working out of love as book-keeping, or Donne's "Valediction," his "two twin compasses"; 3—the complexity of the epic—Byron's *Don Juan,* or most of it.

The word *complexity* is perhaps misleading. Ultimately, the matter of poetic object and its simple entirety must not be forgotten.

I.e. order and the facts as order. 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. A hard job, as poets have found reconciling contrasting principles of facts. In poetry the poet is continually encountering the facts which in the making seem to want to disturb the music and yet the music or the movement cannot exist without the facts, without its facts. The base matter, to speak hurriedly, which must receive the signet of the form. Poems are only acts upon particulars. Only through such activity do they become particulars themselves—i.e. poems.

The mind may construct its world—this is hardly philosophy—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. Linguistic usage has somehow preserved these acts which were poems in other times and have transferred structures now. The good poems of today are not far from the good poems of yesterday.

1931

KENNETH REXROTH
(1905–1982)

Poet, critic, translator, anarchist, and cultural impresario, Kenneth Rexroth, who would occupy the intellectual center of the San Francisco Renaissance, was born in South Bend, Indiana. The only child of affluent, bohemian parents, Rexroth had a nourishing but unconventional childhood in a progressive Christian Socialist household. When he was four, his family relocated to Elkhart—the first of many moves his increasingly erratic parents made as their fortunes rose and fell. Eventually the couple separated, but briefly reunited before his mother's untimely death in 1916. In her final illness she refused to let her ten-year-old son attend school, but instead read to him from her sickbed, urging him to be a writer. Three years later his alcoholic father died suddenly. The orphaned adolescent went to Chicago to live with an aunt, but he quickly rebelled against the conventional new setting. Dropping out of high school at sixteen, Rexroth frequented bohemian Chicago, supporting himself through odd jobs and journalism. Soon he began hitchhiking across the country and later worked his way to Europe and Latin America aboard ships.

In 1927 Rexroth married Andrée Schafer, a painter, and the newlyweds soon moved to San Francisco, the city with which the poet would ever afterwards be associated. "It is the only city in the United States," he observed, "which was not settled overland by the westward-spreading puritan tradition." Deciding to "stay and grow up in the town," Rexroth wrote, painted, and worked in radical politics—usually just scraping by. He briefly joined the Communist Party but left because his own principles were pacifist and anarchist. His marriage also broke up—he would eventually marry four times. In 1932 his poems appeared in Louis Zukofsky's *An "Objectivists" Anthology,* and his first book, *In What Hour* (1940), was published to largely hostile reviews by Northeastern critics who either decried his political defection from the organized Left or considered his West Coast subject matter trivial. Despite his growing reputation and readership, Rexroth would never be read sympathetically by Eastern critics, and he never won a major establishment award.

A conscientious objector and pacifist, Rexroth engaged in antiwar activity during the early days of World War II, especially by helping Japanese