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## From the Late Modernism of the "Objectivists" to the Proto-postmodernism of "Projective Verse"

The Objectivist "movement" is most properly viewed as a second-generation moment in American modernist poetry, a short-lived alliance of poets sharing an admiration for the modernist poetics of Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams and tenuously united under a theoretical banner for a brief period of the 1930s. The Objectivists were active and prominent in American avant-garde circles for only a few years before falling out of the public eye for some two decades, but the Objectivist "nexus" proved to have a tenacious and highly influential half-life. When Charles Olson, himself deeply indebted to Pound and Williams, published his influential 1950 statement of poetics, "Projective Verse," he (probably unwittingly) restated some of the essential tenets Louis Zukofsky had laid down in the various Objectivist manifestos. Olson was an enormously powerful and charismatic figure, and the poets surrounding him – what would later come to be known as the "Black Mountain" group or the "Projectivist" poets – would form a core audience for the reemergence of the original Objectivists, particularly Zukofsky, George Oppen, and Lorine Niedecker, into public prominence. These two generationally separated groups, then, would combine synergistically to make one of the most important "fire-sources" of postwar American avant-garde poetry.

While the word "objectivist" has a philosophical pedigree (Alfred North Whitehead had used it in *Science and the Modern World* [1925]), it first appears in reference to poetry in the February 1931 issue of *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*, "'Objectivists' 1931." Ezra Pound had persuaded Harriet Monroe, the magazine's editor, to allow his young New York protégé Louis Zukofsky to edit a "special number" of the magazine; Monroe, in turn, had insisted that Zukofsky present his selection of poets under the rubric of a "movement" or "group": clearly she was thinking back to the critical and popular interest aroused by Pound's "Imagists" in the years before the First World War.

So far as he knew, Zukofsky was not participating in any distinct "movement" at the time; he simply wanted to present a selection of work by

younger poets whom he found vital and exciting. But under the pressure of Monroe's insistence and an impending deadline, he retooled an essay he had written a year earlier on the work of his friend, Charles Reznikoff, retitling it "Sincerity and Objectification: *With Special Reference to the Work of Charles Reznikoff*," and presented the poets he had chosen as "Objectivists." He had no illusions that his contributors were working together as a group, or would even recognize themselves as "Objectivists." As he told his friend, the poet Carl Rakosi, the whole business was "Foolish – but may excite the reading booblik, hysterectomied & sterilized readers of 'Poetry.'"¹

While he might deprecate the business of movement formation, Zukofsky was entirely serious about the principles of poetics he laid out in "Sincerity and Objectification." "Sincerity" is a kind of hygiene or askesis of composition, a "preoccupation with the accuracy of detail in writing"; it is writing that is "the detail, not mirage, of seeing, of thinking with the things as they exist, and of directing them along a line of melody."² "Thinking with the things as they exist" demands a fidelity to both the objects of the poet's perceptions and the words with which the poet deals. Compositional sincerity rejects both the outright inventions of fiction – the poetry Zukofsky promotes is based on observation rather than imagination – and the mediations of inherited mythology, such as the grail-quest myths underpinning Eliot's *The Waste Land*. Zukofsky would write later, at the height of Eliot's influence, that:

The poet wonders why so many have raised up the word "myth," finding the lack of so-called "myths" in our time a crisis the poet must overcome or die from, as it were, having become too radioactive, when instead a case can be made 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.³

"No myths," Kenner comments, "might be the Objectivist motto."⁴

The concept of "sincerity" clearly owes much to the poetic dicta Pound had issued in *Poetry* magazine back in 1913 on behalf of the "Imagist" movement: "Use no superfluous word.... Go in fear of abstractions.... Use either no ornament or good ornament." Indeed, as Pound emphasized then, "I believe in technique as the test of a man's sincerity."⁵ "Objectification," on the other hand, is a *formal* principle; according to Zukofsky, it is "the arrangement, into one apprehended unit, of minor units of sincerity – in other words, the resolving of words and their ideation into structure." To achieve objectification in writing is to produce a poem which is a "rested totality," "writing ... which is an object or affects the mind as such."⁶ What "objectification" adds to the various Imagist strictures is a principle of overall



poetic form, the notion that the ideally realized poem – and Zukofsky is quick to point out that very few poems, even those of his ostensible subject Reznikoff, achieve such realization – is not merely the result of a painstaking fidelity both to the poet's perceptions and to the language at hand, but achieves "rested totality," a tangible objecthood in the reader's mind.

Such "tangibility" has various analogues in the other arts (visual, sculptural), but Zukofsky's own poetic practice pursues in particular the parallels between poetry and music, not merely in his shorter poems labeled "songs" but in the movements of his long poem "A", which aim to mimic the structures of repetition and variation in the baroque fugue. "Sincerity," then, with its emphasis on directing words "along a line of melody," and "objectification," with its definition of the poem as "writing (audibility in two-dimensional print) which is an object or affects the mind as such," put two important questions put into play: (1) the relationship between language's material, audible or tangible aspect, and (2) its communicative function. Pound's critical writings consistently emphasize this communicative function – "Great literature is simply language charged with meaning to the utmost possible degree."<sup>7</sup> Zukofsky, in contrast, with the examples of Gertrude Stein and James Joyce's "Work in Progress" (*Finnegans Wake*) perhaps in mind, pays rather little attention to notions of readerly clarity.

That stance would put Zukofsky at odds later in the 1930s with fellow leftist writers promoting an aesthetic of "social realism," and while he associated with the editorial staff of the Communist *New Masses* and even published a few brief pieces there, he found it impossible to convince agit-prop-minded editors that a poetics deeply invested in modernist innovation had anything concrete to contribute to the class struggle.<sup>8</sup> Zukofsky's fellow Objectivist George Oppen had Marxist convictions as strong as Zukofsky's own, and a poetics as recalcitrantly modernist, but Oppen had no desire either to modify his work to conform to Party standards or to argue for its political value. Instead, he would abandon poetry and devote himself to concrete political organizing for much of the 1930s. "I did not write 'Marxist' poetry," he later recalled; "I made a choice. Stopped, for the crisis, writing."<sup>9</sup>

It is tempting to read the left-wing modernism of the Objectivists – in particular the early Zukofsky, Oppen, and Niedecker – as little more than a demonstration of the ideological ductility of modernist poetics in general. In this view, such works as Oppen's *Discrete Series*, Zukofsky's "A'-8" or "A'-9," and Niedecker's Mother Goose-derived political lyrics are merely the ideological flip side of Pound's more reactionary Cantos: both bodies of poetry turn the instrument of a paratactic, collagist poetics to a cultural-political end, and whether that end is socialist or authoritarian depends on

the personal inclinations of the poet. But such an equation can only result from a superficial reading of the poetries in question. While the Objectivist poets share with Pound a poetics of the image, of the juxtaposition of textual materials from different realms of discourse, and of the "luminous detail" – the datum that "give[s] one a sudden insight into circumjacent conditions, into their causes, their effects, into sequence, and law"<sup>10</sup> – these poets' emphasis on the tangible "objectification" of the poem, and indeed their ongoing project of foregrounding the materiality of the word in the poem, becomes a sustained analogue for the representation of the material conditions of objects and persons in the world. The leftist poetics of "thinking with the things as they exist," in contrast to the nostalgia of Pound's cultural archaeology, involves a continuous quest for elements of the Utopian precisely in the concrete details of the here and now: in Walter Benjamin's words, "splinters of messianic time."<sup>11</sup>

When, six months after the publication of the "'Objectivists' 1931" *Poetry* issue, Zukofsky defends that issue in the lecture "'Recencies' in Poetry," he emphasizes that "Objectivist" does not name a movement in contemporary poetry ("The interest of the issue was in the few recent lines of poetry which could be found, and in the craft of poetry, NOT in a movement"<sup>12</sup>). There is, in short, no such thing as "Objectivism"; sincerity and objectification are neither new nor revolutionary concepts, but rather transhistorical principles of poem-making. While he showed consistent diffidence about the conceptual foundations of the "group" he had reluctantly named, Zukofsky was more than willing to see how much mileage he and his colleagues could get out of the "Objectivist" moniker. The "'Objectivists' 1931" issue of *Poetry* had attracted considerable publicity, and in its wake Zukofsky and fellow Objectivist George Oppen founded To, Publishers, a press based in France (where Oppen was living), which would put into print works by Pound, Williams, and the Objectivist poets themselves. In 1932, To, Publishers issued the Zukofsky-edited *An "Objectivists" Anthology*, which narrowed down the rag-bag of poets included in the *Poetry* issue and presented larger selections of their work (including the first seven movements of Zukofsky's long poem "A"). But Oppen, who was the press's major funding source, was forced to fold To, Publishers in late 1932. A year later he, Zukofsky, Reznikoff, and Williams formed The Objectivist Press, a collectively edited venture that, after publishing works by Oppen, Williams, and Reznikoff, trailed off in 1936.<sup>13</sup>

In addition to the four "core" Objectivist poets – Zukofsky, Oppen, Rakosi, and Reznikoff – literary history has added Niedecker, a Wisconsin poet who, inspired by the *Poetry* issue, commenced a long relationship with



Zukofsky. (The Northumbrian Basil Bunting, one of Zukofsky's closest correspondents, has also occasionally been included with the group.) Rachel Blau DuPlessis and Peter Quartermain are quite right in identifying the Objectivists as less a "movement" or even a "group" than a "nexus," a historically contingent confluence of a number of disparate poets, and their retrospective critical categorization. The four original Objectivists shared certain sociological commonalities: they were all male, Jewish, and roughly of the political left; they also were all born in the first decade of the century (except for Reznikoff, a decade older than Zukofsky). But far from espousing a common poetic "program" in 1931, they were writing a wide range of disparate poetries: Zukofsky, always highly attuned to the musical qualities of language, was experimenting in casting contemporary life into song-forms and into the recurrent structures of the fugue; Reznikoff's poetry, deeply influenced by his legal training, often took the form of "testimony," and his short poems, usually set in New York City, adapted Imagism to a precise, laconic realism; Rakosi's early work, hearkening back to Wallace Stevens, is often colorful and playful, though Zukofsky's influence turned him in more angular, compressed directions; Oppen wrote a startlingly minimal poetry of urban observation which aimed in part to tease out the oppressive economic structures underlying the phenomena of the "jazz age."

As DuPlessis and Quartermain usefully summarize it, "the term 'Objectivist' has come to mean a non-symbolist, post-imagist poetics, characterized by a historical, realist, antimythological worldview."<sup>14</sup> It *has come* to mean that – but only in the backward glance of literary history. For one thing, by the end of the 1930s, the Objectivists had for the most part entirely fallen off of the map of American poetry. Sometime after The Objectivist Press published his *Discrete Series* in 1934, Oppen, convinced that his poetic vocation and his leftist political commitments were incompatible, had given up poetry entirely. Rakosi had similarly stopped writing, both because of his ambivalence concerning the political value of poetry and the sheer pressures of work. Zukofsky continued to forge ahead with "A" and his shorter lyrics, but the economic circumstances of the Depression had stifled most of the little magazines that had previously published his work; in 1940, he and his wife Celia issued a mimeographed edition of *First Half of "A"*-9, and in 1941 and 1946 two collections of his short poems were published (probably underwritten by Zukofsky himself) by James A. Decker of Prairie City, Illinois – to little public notice. Niedecker's poetry grew astonishingly over the 1930s and 1940s, moving from a surrealist note to a politically inflected "Mother Goose" idiom, and then to a concise but oblique American "folk" voice; but little of this work saw print until 1946, when she too had a collection published by Decker (again to little notice). Only Reznikoff, who had

self-published his earliest books, continued to issue collections of poetry, seemingly unperturbed by the lack of public attention.<sup>15</sup> Over two decades, then – from the late 1930s through the mid-1950s – the Objectivist moment became a minor footnote to the history of American poetry.

Only slightly younger than Zukofsky and his Objectivist comrades, Charles Olson came to poetry in mid-life after a varied career in scholarship and politics. Olson sensed early on that Pound and Williams were the most important American modernist poets, and he visited Pound at St. Elizabeth's mental hospital in Washington on a number of occasions from 1946 to 1948. (Olson's notes on those meetings indicate that he was familiar with Zukofsky's name, if not with his writings.<sup>16</sup>) Olson came to public prominence by dint of a pair of texts: the poem "The Kingfishers" (1949) and the extraordinarily influential essay "Projective Verse" (1950). "The Kingfishers" is something of a belated response to T. S. Eliot's 1922 *The Waste Land*, in which Olson acknowledges Eliot's cultural pessimism but rejects the solutions at which his poetic career arrived. "These fragments I have shored against my ruins," *The Waste Land*'s speaker laments, surveying the "heap of broken images" of quotations from and allusions to the Western canon that make up the poem. Within half a decade, Eliot himself would embrace Christianity as a unifying cultural and spiritual principle. Olson's "The Kingfishers" concludes with the line "I hunt among stones": if contemporary culture presents a panorama of "broken images," Olson implies, the poet's remedy is to work backward, archaeologically, *beyond* the impasse of the Western mind (which Olson dated to the classificatory project set in train by Plato and Aristotle). Olson's mature work, then, is an attempt to recover a holism lost at the very beginning of Western civilization.<sup>17</sup>

"Projective Verse," which was first published in *Poetry New York* in 1950, and excerpted at length the next year in Williams's *Autobiography*, is a broadside blast at late-1940s American poetry, a poetry which, in Olson's view, had backtracked from the innovations of Pound and Williams to a traditional, "closed" formalism, "that verse which print bred."<sup>18</sup> In contrast, Olson offers a theory of "projective" or "open" verse, a concept of poetic form rooted not in a historical tradition of rhyme and meter but in the poet's own physical *body*. (Olson's editors point out that while "Projective Verse" is an act of *literary* theorizing, Olson's ultimate interest is "phenomenological," as is made most clear in his short prose volume of 1965, *Proprioception*.)<sup>19</sup> "Projective Verse" falls into two parts: first, Olson's description of what the act of composing "projective or OPEN verse" involves – a poetics, that is; and then a consideration of "what stance toward reality brings such verse into being, what that stance does, both to the poet and to his reader."<sup>20</sup>



"Projective verse" rejects all previous rules for poetic line, stanza, and overall form; instead it treats the space of the potential poem as a "field" open for composition in any direction. Its paramount formal rule is a principle Olson learned from his younger correspondent Robert Creeley, that "FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF CONTENT." Projective verse must manifest speed, energy, vigor: "ONE PERCEPTION MUST IMMEDIATELY AND DIRECTLY LEAD TO A FURTHER PERCEPTION," as Olson quotes his friend Edward Dahlberg. "[G]et on with it," Olson exhorts, "keep moving, keep in, speed, the nerves, their speed, the perceptions, theirs, the acts, the split second acts, the whole business, keep it moving as fast as you can, citizen." The basis of this open-form, almost frenetically energetic composition is the poet's own somatic totality, in which the brain and the heart are organs among other organs rather than the disembodied "spirit" or "mind" of Cartesian dualistic thought. "The HEAD" gives rise to "the SYLLABLE," but only in conjunction with "the EAR," as "the HEART" determines "the LINE," but only in conjunction with "the BREATH."<sup>21</sup>

It is in the brief second part of "Projective Verse," where Olson outlines the "stance toward reality" such verse manifests, that he explicitly mentions the Objectivists. Pound and Williams are the clear progenitors of the poetics he describes, and "it is no accident that Pound and Williams both were involved variously in a movement which got called 'objectivism.' But that word was then used in some sort of a necessary quarrel, I take it, with 'subjectivism.'" Olson himself, to avoid such philosophical connotations, would call his "stance" "Objectism":

the getting rid of the lyrical interference of the individual as ego, of the "subject" and his soul, that peculiar presumption by which western man has interposed himself between what he is as a creature of nature (with certain instructions to carry out) and those other creations of nature which we may, with no derogation, call objects.<sup>22</sup>

The Projectivist poet, then by overcoming the "lyrical interference of the ego" and letting the body, especially the *voice*, participate fully in the poem's composition, can achieve a larger perspective on the phenomena of the world, a deeper insight into the heart of events.

Olson's memory of what the Objectivists were up to in the 1930s is clearly fuzzy. Far from pursuing a "necessary quarrel" with "subjectivism," Zukofsky was careful to place "'Objectivists' in quotes: no infringement, i.e. of philosophical etiquette, intended";<sup>23</sup> and he *never* used the nominal "Objectivism." (Perhaps Olson picked up "objectism" from correspondence or conversation with Williams, who was laxer with his terms.<sup>24</sup>) But

"Projective Verse" coincides rather closely with Zukofsky's Objectivist manifestos at several moments. Olson's rejection of the "closed" forms of traditional meter, line, and stanza echoes Zukofsky's assertion that "each poem has its own laws"; and Olson's enthusiasm for the typewriter – "For the first time the poet has the stave and the bar a musician has"<sup>25</sup> – is anticipated in the non-typing Zukofsky's endorsement of typography as an element of the poem, "if print and the arrangement of it will help tell how the voice should sound."<sup>26</sup> Olson's account of how projective verse involved "getting rid of the lyrical interference of the individual as ego, of the 'subject' and his soul" parallels Zukofsky's rather more arcane description of the poem "as object. . . . Perfect rest – or nature as creator, existing, perfect, experience perfecting activity of existence, making – theologically, perhaps – like the Ineffable –".<sup>27</sup> And Zukofsky's description of sincerity as writing that is "the detail, not mirage, of seeing, of thinking with the things as they exist" is almost uncannily echoed in Olson's assertion that "the objects which occur at every given moment of composition (of recognition, we can call it) are, can be, must be treated exactly as they do occur therein and not by any ideas or preconceptions from outside the poem." While "Projective Verse" presents no principle of overall form that directly parallels "objectification," Olson's sense of the poet's necessary fidelity to immediate thought and perception strongly evokes Zukofsky's principle of compositional "sincerity," and Olson's assertion that "every element in an open poem" must be "taken up" "just as solidly as we are accustomed to take what we call the objects of reality" provides a sense of the tangibility of the poet's materials that closely follows Zukofsky's.<sup>28</sup>

When he read "Projective Verse," Zukofsky was convinced that Olson had done him a disservice: while dismissing the original Objectivist "movement" and misreading Zukofsky's writings, he had restated many of the Objectivist principles as his own – in the process gaining them a far wider audience.<sup>29</sup> Olson's untidy but enormously energetic prose, his dynamic teaching and conversation, and the attraction of his radical poetics made him a flash-point and personal influence in twentieth-century American poetry second only perhaps to Pound himself. In 1951, Olson became the rector of Black Mountain College, a small liberal arts institution in North Carolina, and in his five years there he set about engineering a renaissance in American poetry. The "Black Mountain" or "Projectivist" poets in Olson's orbit were not all present at Black Mountain, but Creeley and Robert Duncan taught at the college, and among the students were Jonathan Williams, Edward Dorn, Joel Oppenheimer, and John Wieners. Olson had been in intense correspondence with the Boston poet Cid Corman, serving as informal, logorrheic, and often hectoring editorial advisor for Corman's fledgling journal *Origin*.



The English-born Denise Levertov was brought into Olson's orbit by way of her friendship with Creeley. All of these poets pursued some variation of "composition by field," and many of them composed statements of poetics, all of which can be read as the lineal descendents of "Projective Verse."

The prominence that Olson's influence had come to assume in avant-garde poetics by the end of the 1950s is evident in Donald Allen's groundbreaking 1960 anthology, *The New American Poetry, 1945-1960*. Allen's anthology, a riposte to the formalist, New Criticism-inspired selections of Donald Hall, Robert Pack, and Louis Simpson's *New Poets of England and America* (1957), presented the work of forty-four "outsider" poets, many of them published only in periodicals. Crucially, Allen presented his selections in rough "groups" – Black Mountain poets, San Francisco Renaissance, Beats, New York Poets. By far the largest of Allen's groups is the Black Mountain poets, and Olson, who appears first in the anthology ("The Kingfishers"), is given approximately four times as much page space as the average poet included, while "Projective Verse" leads off a selection of "Statements on Poetics" at the end of the volume. *The New American Poetry*, reprinted numerous times throughout the 1960s and 1970s (by the mid-1960s it had gone through eight printings, with 40,000 copies in print), became something of a Bible of American counterpoetics, a foundational document for various postmodern movements – and Olson is its most prominent prophet.<sup>30</sup>

The poets in Olson's circle, it is safe to say, spearheaded the "rediscovery" of the Objectivists. Duncan had been in correspondence with Zukofsky since 1947, and introduced Creeley to his work in 1955. Creeley published Zukofsky in *Black Mountain Review*, and he and Duncan communicated their enthusiasm for Zukofsky's work to their students at Black Mountain College. Jonathan Williams, who had worked with Olson at Black Mountain and had printed the first collection of Olson's *The Maximus Poems* under his Jargon Society imprint, went on to publish Zukofsky's *Some Time* (1956) and Niedecker's *T&G: Collected Poems 1936-1968* (1969). Corman, the first series of whose *Origin* (1951-57) was largely a platform for Olson's writing, devoted much of the second series of that periodical (1961-64) to Zukofsky's work, and in 1959 Origin Books issued the first half of Zukofsky's long poem, "A" 1-12. Levertov, who in 1959 cited Creeley and Duncan as "the chief poets among my contemporaries," became poetry advisor to the publisher W. W. Norton and facilitated the publication of Zukofsky's *ALL: The Collected Short Poems* (1965).<sup>31</sup>

The other Objectivists reemerged into the public eye in the first part of the 1960s. Oppen, living in Mexico but shortly to return to the United States, began writing poetry again in 1958; similarly, Rakosi resumed writing in the mid-1960s, spurred by a correspondence with English poet Andrew Crozier.

Along with Reznikoff, these two former Objectivists found a publishing outlet in James Laughlin's *New Directions*, which (initially in collaboration with the *San Francisco Review*, edited by Oppen's half-sister June Oppen Degnan) issued a half-dozen of their books over the course of the 1960s.<sup>32</sup> Public recognition came in the form of a Pulitzer Prize in Poetry for Oppen's *Of Being Numerous* in 1968, the same year that L. S. Dembo began the process of critical and scholarly consecration by inviting Zukofsky, Oppen, Rakosi, and Reznikoff to gather for a conference on the Objectivist "movement" at the University of Wisconsin. Zukofsky by this point was bitterly estranged from Oppen and refused to participate, so Dembo brought each poet to campus *seriatim*, collecting his conversations with them in the journal *Contemporary Literature* as "The Objectivist Poet: Four Interviews."<sup>33</sup>

By the end of the 1960s, then, both the Objectivists – a second generation of "high modernists" – and the Projectivists – a first generation of "post-moderns" (Olson himself had been among the first to use that term) – were active forces in the avant-garde of American poetry. The dozen or score of poets who were either associated with Black Mountain or who were now being mentioned as resurgent Objectivists wrote in a bewildering variety of idioms: the outward-spiralling, continents- and geological age-spanning reach of Olson's *Maximus Poems*; Creeley's compact, tightly engineered and oblique lyrics; Duncan's richly allusive and mystical poems, which drew as deeply on Romantic tropes and voicings as they did on modernist traditions of parataxis and collage; Oppen's profoundly philosophical meditations on community, history, and the human condition; and the increasingly complex later movements of "A", a poem that shared the historical scope and Cantos-like referentiality of *The Maximus Poems*, but which in its densely woven textures and idiosyncratic formal structures was the polar opposite of Olson's.

All of the Projectivists and the Objectivists shared an ongoing investment in foregrounding the materiality of their language. Such foregrounding was pressed to an extreme in Zukofsky's translation (with his wife Celia) of Catullus (1969), which aims to preserve the *sound* of Catullus's Latin – "tries to breathe with him," as Zukofsky puts it – often at the expense of the original's lexical meaning, and usually at the expense of recognizable English syntax.<sup>34</sup> Zukofsky's late work, from the middle sections of "A" to the posthumously published *80 Flowers* (1978), becomes an almost continuous web of quoted, translated, and transliterated texts, obdurate blocks of tantalizing, polysemic textuality.

Such texts, along with Gertrude Stein's earlier experiments in "cubist" writing, Olson's dense but fragmentary poems, and the scattered obliquities of such poets in the Black Mountain orbit as Larry Eigner, would become



primary influences on Language writing, the bicoastal avant-garde tendency that emerged in the 1970s and 1980s. A quarter-century's retrospect enables one to see that Language writing, despite the phalanx of unifying essays and manifestos issued throughout the 1980s by its practitioners (among them Lyn Hejinian, Charles Bernstein, Ron Silliman, and Barrett Watten), is no more tight-knit a "movement" than the Objectivists or the Black Mountain poets had been. But running throughout the Language writers' work is an emphasis on the poem's textuality and on the poetic possibilities of manipulating the word as a material unit. This emphasis announces itself as early as Robert Grenier's 1971 pronouncement "I HATE SPEECH" in the first issue of *This*, a journal he coedited with Watten – a statement that Silliman claims heralds "a new moment in American writing."<sup>35</sup> Grenier is by no means disowning Olson's equation of the poet's line with his or her physical breath, nor the explorations in speech-based poetics carried out by Creeley, Duncan, and various Objectivists; rather he is rejecting the formally slack, conversational, unreflexive first-person poetics that he and other Language writers saw as dominating American verse culture with the rise of the MFA industry.

For most of the Language writers, an investment in the materiality of the poetic text goes hand in hand with a leftist politics, and indeed various Language poets have made forceful arguments for the political charge inherent to their own disruptions of syntax and poetic frame. Such claims have rightly sparked vigorous arguments, many of them at first glance little more than rehashing of the Brecht/Lukács/Adorno debates of mid-century.<sup>36</sup> What is striking is the degree to which the Language writers, however overreaching their early claims about the political resonance of their poetics may sometimes seem, have, like the Objectivists before them, steadfastly worked to uncover the parallels and connections between a materialist politics and a poetics of linguistic materiality: if the Objectivists pursued a poetics of *liberation*, one might hazard, the Language writers have for the most part pursued a poetics of *critique*.

Even though the Objectivist-Projectivist nexus now appears less a "strain" in American poetry than an *environment*, a vast and almost inescapable background to much of the innovative writing of our fin-de-siècle, a number of poets outside of the Language movement have made especially personal use of the inheritance of Black Mountain and the writing of the poets briefly associated in the February 1931 *Poetry*. There are, of course, a number of confirmed "Olsonians," poets whose work is deeply invested in Olson's mannerisms and habits of thought, such as Donald Wellman, Gerritt Lansing, and Don Byrd, among others. More interesting, however, is Susan Howe, whose work is predicated in large part on Olson's liberation of the

page space for free composition, and who, like Olson, is fascinated with the traces of the historical past. But Howe's poetics, unlike Olson's, do not concern themselves with a perhaps imaginary pre-lapsarian state of being in the world; instead they pursue the textual and historical traces of what Western patriarchy has persistently tried to eliminate or suppress: the extravagant, the antinomian.

What one might call a second generation of Objectivist poets – among them Michael Heller, Norman Finkelstein, Michael Palmer, and Rachel Blau DuPlessis – have pursued poetic projects deeply indebted to Oppen, Zukofsky, and Niedecker for models of musical clarity, concision, and formal invention. At the same time, these latter-day Objectivists have matured in the shadow of Black Mountain, and the formal and tonal restraint they inherit from the first generation of Objectivists is enlivened by a very Olsonian sense of exploration, of the poem as a field in which anything, in the long run, might find its place.

If Olson and Zukofsky during their own lifetimes could find little common ground in the politics of the innovative poetry "scene," their combined inheritance is perhaps best illustrated in the career of Ronald Johnson, whose early introduction to contemporary poetry came by way of his partner, Jonathan Williams, who had studied with Olson at Black Mountain and who published both Zukofsky and Niedecker. Johnson's long poem *ARK* is a formally various and high-spirited celebration of the intertwined systems of physics and the human sensorium, and pays particular homage to both Olson and Zukofsky – "The Minimalist and The Maximus," as Johnson calls them in an explanatory note.<sup>37</sup> Johnson's poem, while it presents itself as a Blakean visionary poetry, and while it may be read as an idiosyncratically *spiritual* poetry, is a studiously *apolitical* work: his long poem, he insists, does *not* include history. While the combined Objectivist-Projectivist nexus has been central to American innovative poetry of the second half of the twentieth century, *ARK* demonstrates that the works of those poets can be read (merely) as a formal and musical provocation; later generations of poets are always in danger of overlooking or erasing the social text inherent in the Objectivists'

## NOTES

1. Cited in Mark Scroggins, *The Poem of a Life: A Biography of Louis Zukofsky* (Emeryville, CA: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2007) 112.
2. Louis Zukofsky, "Sincerity and Objectification," *Prepositions+: The Collected Critical Essays* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 2000) 199, 194.
3. *Ibid.*, 10.
4. Hugh Kenner, *A Homemade World: The American Modernist Writers* (1975; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989) 187.



5. Ezra Pound, "A Retrospect," *Literary Essays*, ed. T. S. Eliot (1935; New York: New Directions, 1968) 4-5, 9.
6. Zukofsky, 194.
7. Pound, 23.
8. See Mark Scroggins, "The Revolutionary Word: Zukofsky, *New Masses*, and Political Radicalism in the 1930s," *Upper Limit Music: The Writing of Louis Zukofsky*, ed. Mark Scroggins (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1997) 44-63.
9. Cited in Peter Nicholls, *George Oppen and the Fate of Modernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) 19.
10. Ezra Pound, *Selected Prose 1909-1965*, ed. William Cookson (New York: New Directions, 1973) 22.
11. Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," *Selected Writings Volume 4, 1938-1940*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, trans. Edmund Jephcott et al. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003) 397.
12. Zukofsky, 214.
13. On the publishing history of the "movement," see Tom Sharp, "The 'Objectivists' Publications," *Sagetrieb* 3.3 (Winter 1984): 41-47, and Scroggins, "The 'Objectivists' and Their Publications," *Z-Site: A Companion to the Works of Louis Zukofsky*, [www.z-site.net/biblio-research/Objectivists-Publications.php](http://www.z-site.net/biblio-research/Objectivists-Publications.php)
14. Rachel Blau DuPlessis and Peter Quartermain, "Introduction," *The Objectivist Nexus: Essays in Cultural Poetics* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1999) 3.
15. For the publishing history of these latter poets, see Scroggins, *The Poem of a Life*, Jenny Penberthy's introduction and textual notes to Niedecker, *Collected Works* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), and Seamus Cooney's textual notes to Reznikoff, *Poems 1918-1936* (Santa Barbara, CA: Black Sparrow Press, 2976) and *Poems 1937-1975* (Santa Barbara, CA: Black Sparrow Press, 1978).
16. See Olson, *Charles Olson and Ezra Pound: An Encounter at St. Elizabeths*, ed. Catherine Seelye (1975; New York: Paragon House, 1991). The most comprehensive examination of Zukofsky and Olson's relationship is in Anne Day Dewey, *Beyond Maximus: The Construction of Public Voice in Black Mountain Poetry* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007) 223-225n.4.
17. Charles Olson, *The Collected Poems of Charles Olson, Excluding the Maximus Poems*, ed. George F. Butterick (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987) 93.
18. Olson, "Projective Verse," *Collected Prose*, ed. Donald Allen and Benjamin Friedlander (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997) 239.
19. *Ibid.*, 424n.
20. *Ibid.*, 239.
21. *Ibid.*, 239-242.
22. *Ibid.*, 247.
23. Zukofsky, 214.
24. See *The Autobiography of William Carlos Williams* (New York: Random House, 1951) 265, where Williams writes of "Objectivism."
25. Olson, *Collected Prose*, 245.
26. Zukofsky, 211.

27. *Ibid.*, 207.
28. Olson, *Collected Prose*, 243.
29. Scroggins, 264-265.
30. Robert von Hallberg, *American Poetry and Culture, 1945-1980* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985) 14.
31. *The New American Poetry: 1945-1960*, ed. Donald Allen (New York: Grove Press, 1960) 412.
32. Over the 1960s, New Directions published Oppen's *The Materials* (1962), *This In Which* (1965), and *Of Being Numerous* (1968), Rakosi's *Amulet* (1967), and Reznikoff's *By the Waters of Manhattan: Selected Verse* (1962) and *Testimony: The United States, 1885-1890, Recitative* (1965).
33. Scroggins, 407-408.
34. Zukofsky, *Prepositions*, 225.
35. Ron Silliman, ed., *In the American Tree: Language, Realism, Poetry* (Orono, ME: National Poetry Foundation, 1986) xv.
36. See Theodor Adorno et al., *Aesthetics and Politics* (London: New Left Books, 1977); an early but vigorous and still representative debate about Language writing is the exchange among Jerome J. McGann, Charles Altieri, and Jed Rasula in *Politics and Poetic Value*, ed. Robert von Hallberg (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).
37. Ronald Johnson, ARK (Albuquerque, NM: Living Batch Press, 1996), "A Note" (n.p.).

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