

“Light lights in air”: Value, price, profit and Louis Zukofsky’s poetry

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We are posting below a comment on the life and work of American poet Louis Zukofsky (1904–78), a remarkable figure, largely unrecognized today—except by certain academics and generally for the wrong reasons. The author of the piece, a guest contributor, published the first doctorate on Zukofsky’s poetry.

Zukofsky, the child of immigrant parents who did not speak English, grew up on the Lower East Side of Manhattan and attended Columbia University at a precocious age. Like many of this generation, he gravitated to the left, toward support for the Russian Revolution and the Communist Party, which he attempted to join, without success, in 1925.

Biographer Mark Scroggins writes, “Zukofsky’s Marxism was heartfelt, and sprang at least in part from his own situation as the youngest child of a laborer in the garment industry.” Of course, it was not the “Marxist” movement to which he gravitated, unfortunately, but the already Stalinized Communist Party of the USA, one of the most opportunist and intellectually debased of the Stalinist parties. Also, like many of his generation, he moved away from that milieu after 1939, the time of the Stalin-Hitler pact.

Zukofsky, according to fellow poet and ardent admirer Robert Creeley, wrote “complex and incomparable poems,” which were “centered in history and politics.” Creeley notes in Zukofsky’s work a sense of the epoch, “with its increasing industrialization, immigration, urban growth, political ferment and shift, a major war, a boom economy and a subsequent bust, a rejection of much that the past had seemed to qualify and secure.” The poems are often difficult, influenced in the first instance by Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, James Joyce and others, as well as by modernist music.

The poet and his wife, Celia, also the child of immigrants and a trained musician, collaborated for forty years. The longtime friendship and association between Zukofsky—Jewish and a would-be Communist—and Pound, a supporter of Italian fascism and an anti-Semite, is worth an entire study on its own.

Zukofsky attempted something difficult, to bring together his notion of Marxism, the political developments of the day and the mundane realities of his life and circumstances, all while working out the implications of intense modernism for poetry. It would be impossible to suggest that he succeeded. Even many of his earlier poems are inaccessible at times, the language so severe and elliptical that the reader is often kept outside, fascinated but uncomprehending. At times, he simply tries too hard.

However, certain of Zukofsky’s lyrics, often in small pieces or fragments, are as beautiful as American poetry gets:

I walk in the old street
to hear the beloved songs
afresh
this spring night.
Like the leaves—my loves wake— ...
Or this:
Drive, fast kisses,

no need to see
hands or eyelashes
a mouth at her ear
trees or leaves
night or the days.

As the following article suggests, Louis Zukofsky deserves wider reading and recognition.

– David Walsh

Louis Zukofsky, “A”, New Directions, 846 pages
Louis Zukofsky, Anew: Complete Shorter Poetry, New Directions, 365 pages

After a very promising early start under the tutelage of American poets Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams in the late twenties and early thirties, Louis Zukofsky ran with his beloved wife Celia what amounted to a Mom and Pop stand in the literary world. He often self-published short poems in sequences which bewailed his neglect as a poet and celebrated his marriage to Celia and its issue, Paul. His son’s birth, childhood wisdom, going away to college and becoming a well-known practitioner of twentieth-century musical compositions constitute much of the content of the later part of “A”, a long poem Zukofsky worked on for many years (in fact, 1927 to 1978).

It had not helped that his two major poetry masters, Pound and Williams, were out of favor at a time after World War II when universities and their increasingly more important publishing arms favored the so-called “academic” and “confessional” poets and their lives of troubled desperation. Pound was also discredited for his support for Mussolini and other atrocities. Zukofsky was considered an imitator, a “figment of Ezra Pound’s imagination”, as poet Robert Lowell unhelpfully called him.

Zukofsky was not very productive outside the ferment of clashing artistic ideas among creative intellectuals which characterized his sudden emergence in the very first ranks of the international avant garde in 1928. The ferment and clash continued with his manifestos and programmatic statements during the Objectivist movement and publishing collective of 1931-1932, and the opening movements of “A”, planned to come out over a lifetime and reflect the poet in history. The early poems were simultaneously working out the possibilities of the long poem form by modernist method, while reflecting objectively what Pound called the *p aideuma*, the core issues of his time.

In fact, Zukofsky had a very strange trajectory through the avant-garde literature of the last century, going in and out of favor according to strong historical pressures. This is reflected in his poem “A” itself, constructed in 24 movements, from its earliest calls for revolution, through its disenchantment with the American Communist Party at the time of the great purge trials and disasters of the Popular Front leading to the poem’s final, nearly incomprehensible sections.

The trials and tribulations of Zukofsky’s publishing history are legendary, and contribute to his aura of a “poet’s poet”. Soon after his

passing in 1978, Zukofsky's work moved to an ever swankier address within the academic world, supported by the postmodern poet-professors of the so-called Language school. In that uncanny, ahistorical realm, language is detached from reference and nothing is as it seems. Contrary to this, Zukofsky had insisted: "The revolutionary word if it must revolve cannot escape having a reference."

Zukofsky's earlier engagement with Marxism, however distorted it was by the Communist Party in its Stalinist twists and turns, is something of a scandal to the Language school academics, who have championed, explained and brought into prominence Zukofsky's extraordinarily dense later work as a foundation text of their tendency. Check them out on video reading Zukofsky by their lights in the September 2004 Columbia University and Barnard College-sponsored conference, "Zukofsky/100".

Charles Bernstein, the chief representative of the Language poets, brought out an edition of Zukofsky's *Selected Poems* (2006), edited the *Wesleyan Centennial Edition of the Complete Critical Writings of Louis Zukofsky* and then presided over a special issue of the very influential *Jacket* magazine (*Jacket 30*, July 2006) devoted to Zukofsky studies, with himself and his associates richly represented.

The aforementioned progeny, Paul Zukofsky, then threw a spanner in the works in a letter that grumpily asserted, "I am the only child, and sole heir, of Louis and Celia Zukofsky. I am also the person with sole control over all their copyrights, including works both published and unpublished. *Jacket 30* is in gross violation of those copyrights." Zukofsky's son, a concert violinist, was being especially cruel to poor underpaid graduate students whose life work he was destroying with a shrug, stating that he would prefer all scholarly work on Louis Zukofsky to stop.

Zukofsky was once a poet who wove Marx—especially the chapter on "Commodities" in Volume 1 of *Capital*—through the first movements of "A", indeed turning it into a *canzone* [a complex poetic form especially associated with the Italian poet Guido Cavalcanti] in "A"-9: "An impulse to action sings of a semblance / Of things related as equated values, / The measure all use is time congealed labor / In which abstraction things keep no resemblance / To goods created; integrated all hues / Hide their natural use to one or another's neighbor."

Perhaps it is time to take up again the Zukofsky with a chip on his shoulder and fire in his belly, who read T.S. Eliot's famed poem *The Waste Land* (1922) and William Carlos Williams' alarmed response to it in *Spring and All* (1923) and published in *Exile 3* his own reaction in "Poem beginning 'The'" (published 1928).

That poem delighted Pound despite—or because—of its attack on Mussolini, and this in 1928 ("'Il Duce: I feel God deeply.' / Black shirts—black shirts—some power / is so funereal"), praise for the October Revolution ("It is your Russia that is free, mother") and an account of his education at Columbia from the persona of a very bitter Jew, specifically Shylock, as an undergraduate: "I might as well look Shagetz just as much / as Jew / I'll read their Donne as mine, / And leopard in their spots. ... The villainy they teach me I will execute / And it shall go hard with them, / For I'll better the instruction, / Having learned, so to speak, in their / colleges." A *shagetz*, by the way, is a male *shiksa*, a gentile.

The poem has a number of memorable lines, including, "If horses could but sing Bach, mother,— / Remember how I wished it once— / Now I kiss you who could never sing Bach, / never read Shakespeare." It ends in light with the rising sun of Socialism, "our Comrade", from Yehoash [Yiddish-language poet Solomon Blumgarten], followed by a poetic sequence, *29 Poems*, which Zukofsky opens with "Memory of V.I. Ulianov", i.e., Lenin, recently deceased, turned into a shining star seen through elms.

Zukofsky grew up in the poverty and intellectual wealth of Manhattan's Lower East Side at a time when the most advanced intellectual tendencies fought it out in Yiddish study sessions, meetings and newspaper articles.

There is no accurate way of reading early Zukofsky without understanding the vibrant socialist intellectual culture so produced which attracted Ezra Pound strongly to New York Jewish poets in Zukofsky's circle, like Carl Rakosi, Charles Reznikoff and George Oppen (who served as Communist Party election campaign manager in Brooklyn in 1936 and helped organize the Utica, New York milk strike of 1937).

This is one of the many periods badly covered or altogether neglected in official Zukofsky studies. A very large number of Jewish intellectuals turned toward socialism, and many like Zukofsky from the tenements and sweatshops of the Lower East Side experienced the exhilaration, hope and clarity of that "awakening", or *Haskalah*, when the Enlightenment was not yet an entry in Wikipedia, still less the road to Auschwitz as the Frankfurt School and postmodernists think. This ideological-cultural "Awakening" was a means to win over youngsters like Zukofsky raised in the poverty and exploitation in great battles against the backwardness and superstition that was brought to the new world from the Jewish *shtetl* [villages in Central and Eastern Europe] along with the light of socialism from the cities.

As a result of these mighty struggles for modern culture, Zukofsky, inspired by his older brother Morris, could recite in Yiddish much of Longfellow and attended great Yiddish productions of his lifelong passion, the Bard, while his much-honored father opened the *shul* for morning prayers and meekly worked for starvation wages. The *shmata* [clothing] business, you know: "[H]e pressed pants / Every crease a blade / The irons weighed / At least twenty pounds / But moved both of them / Six days a week / From six in the morning / To nine, sometimes eleven at night, / Or midnight." ("A")

At this time, Columbia opened its gates to Jews by instituting an entrance exam and thus accepted Zukofsky, who gained his master's degree at 20. His circle of Whittaker Chambers (Zukofsky's closest friend), Lionel Trilling, Sidney Hook, Felix Morrow, Meyer Schapiro, Herbert Solow and Clifton Fadiman remained close to the Communist Party for the first and most productive decade of his life. This is the period most neglected by the postmodernists of the Language school. Yet the parts of "A" and shorter poems gathered in *Anew* most often cited as an invitation to his poetry belong to this time.

How the members of this circle joined or supported the then newly formed Communist Party, became disenchanted and then charted a course to the right deserves a study of its own—a brief review of the process found also in Zukofsky's trajectory deserves further consideration.

It should be remembered that as part of their national-opportunist zigs and zags, the Stalinists now in control of the Communist International turned "left" in what is remembered as the "Third Period" (1928–1934). The American Communist Party, a relatively small movement, demagogically and emptily called for the formation of Soviets in the United States and immediate revolution, and attracted a layer of intellectuals to its periphery, Zukofsky's Columbia and later Objectivist circle among them.

While Zukofsky and Chambers remained loyal to the CP for a time, their Columbia circle became disenchanted when at the culmination of this ultra-left turn, the American Stalinists branded all other labor tendencies as "social-fascist". In February 1934, at the height of this international Stalinist policy—which led to unimaginable tragedy for the German working class in particular—several thousand CP members or supporters, led by *Daily Worker* editor Clarence Hathaway, broke up a Madison Square Garden rally held by the Socialist Party and garment unions in defense of the persecuted Austrian Social Democrats.

Twenty-five intellectuals, formerly supporters of the Stalinist party, signed a letter of protest and ceased their support. Among them were Trilling, Fadiman, Solow, Schapiro and Morrow (the latter three moved seriously toward Trotsky). Soon afterward, the Stalinists dropped their ultra-left line more or less without explanation and called for the

formation of Popular Fronts, subordinating the working class to bourgeois parties and leading to further betrayals and defeats.

The experience and eventual disenchantment with Stalinism had a great deal to do with emptying the avant garde in literature of its rich, politically engaged content and with ultimately and unhappily landing Zukofsky in the postmodernist territory of the Language school.

Chambers deserted the Communist Party in April 1938 and ended up a pillar of American conservatism after his central role in the Alger Hiss trials, which brought the young Richard Nixon to political prominence. Herbert Solow, to his credit, was a main organizer of the Commission of Inquiry set up to investigate Stalin's accusations against Trotsky chaired by Columbia professor, the pragmatist philosopher and educator, John Dewey. He also served as editor of *The Organizer* put out by the Trotskyist leadership of the Minneapolis Teamsters Strike of 1934. But Solow too ended up deserting socialism for Henry Luce and his *Fortune* magazine.

In a September 1936 letter to Ezra Pound, Zukofsky expressed some bewilderment at the Moscow Trials ("Wish I, too, knew more about the Moscow executions"). He acknowledged that Trotsky's "attitude & political line have to say the least been consistent since the death of Lenin" and expressed skepticism about the monstrous charges against the exiled Bolshevik leader. Zukofsky, however, echoed the pragmatic, anti-Marxist views of wide layers of the "left" middle class intelligentsia of the day by suggesting that Trotsky was "helping to endanger the existence of Socialist Russia working towards communism" in a Europe divided between two principles, "the Socialist state vs. the corporate [fascist] state."

As a poet, Zukofsky was influenced among other things by the Pound tradition of the long poem, characterized by an engagement with the community, "the human universe" as Charles Olson called it. Zukofsky and others took on the mantle of the epic poets of the past and in poems working away in the modern manner addressed what they considered the big issues facing the human community, in a faith that was almost always shaken in the end.

The importance of content as an engagement with history arose, thrived and lost out—in the end—to empty formalism, but that was less a loss of belief in the power of poetry to change the world than in the ideological system that had structured the poets' world. In Zukofsky's case that may be precisely dated from the time he entered Columbia as a 16-year-old to the catastrophic consequences of the Stalinist Popular Front marked by the fall of Paris in 1940 and commemorated in the tenth "movement" of "A".

The "Pound Question" is a complex one. At this stage we may conclude at the very least that his well-known fascist sympathy in the war and broadcasts on behalf of Mussolini need be set against his enthusiastic support of Zukofsky's circle, mostly Jewish and avowedly Marxist.

British painter and writer Wyndham Lewis, with whom Pound worked on the Vorticist magazine *Blast* in 1913-14, offered some insight into the American poet's personality. Lewis called Pound, "A bombastic galleon, palpably bound to, or from, the Spanish Main. Going on board, I discovered beneath its skull and cross-bones, intertwined with *fleurs de lys* and spattered with preposterous starspangled oddities, a heart of gold."

Pound had discovered the power of "movements" which consisted of little more than a manifesto, a special issue of a journal and an anthology. At his most enthusiastic, he would be praising and advising Zukofsky almost daily, sometimes more often, in letters, introducing his discovery to editors, giving him the benefit of his time, his wondrous editing, academic sponsorship. When his friend James Joyce was down on his luck, Pound sent him a pair of old shoes. According to Ernest Hemingway (in *A Moveable Feast*), Pound was "so kind to people that I always thought of him as a sort of saint."

The touching relationship between Zukofsky and Pound, which did not cease in warmth and respect to the end of their days, is an aspect of the

passing on of the modernist tradition to another generation of Zukofsky's Objectivist circle, and then again through Robert Creeley and his generation, or "company" as he called it.

Zukofsky fought for years to have "A" *I-12* (1959, 1967) in print. The poetic sequence *Anew* (1943), also the name of the collection of shorter poems that New Directions is bringing back, was the last volume that a publisher brought out for a very long time. A testament to Zukofsky's mood during the long period of his neglect is the title of the sequence "Barely and Widely" (1962), which refers to Louis' complaining to his soul mate Celia, as he often did, about how "barely" he was known and how "widely" neglected. This was true at least until many of the poets represented in Donald Allen's very influential anthology, *The New American Poetry* (1959), discovered and championed him in their war against "academic" poets and the Eliot-inspired "New Criticism", which ruled English departments after the Second World War.

Zukofsky, neglected for decades, and neglected as well in Allen's anthology, came to be published in the sixties in little magazines and little presses which preferred "open" poetic forms and a personal style of address to the classically shaped text inviting close reading that was critically admired and academically studied in the *Partisan*, *Sewanee* and *Kenyon Reviews* and the *Yale* and *Southern Quarterlies*.

"A" was by design "a poem of a life —and a time", and the timing was wrong. It took Cid Corman of Origin Press—feeding a Pound-inspired poetry publishing habit by running an ice cream shop in Kyoto—to bring out the slim first half of "A" *I-12* in an edition of 200 in 1959, later brought out by *Paris Review* /Doubleday free with each subscription in 1967. Finally, a scholar of modernism, Hugh Kenner, got the ball going. He promoted Zukofsky as a modernist of the "Pound Era" in influential studies before ultimately ushering the completed "A" *I-24* into print at the University of California Press shortly after Zukofsky's death.

"A" reflects one period through the seventh movement completed by 1930, another a decade later, and by its serial publishing format carries its own past within its structure. Zukofsky, having abandoned "A", returned to it in the sixties at a time when artists in so many mediums were gaining recognition as abstract expressionists, underground filmmakers, experimental prose writers or dramatists and such. Not surprisingly, the work "of a life – and a time", "A" *I-24*, had an afterlife. How a work like "A" is received and perceived at different times, how it lives or else disappears, especially how it gathers a community around it or loses another is a fascinating area of literary studies, one well deserving funding when serious cultural value returns to English departments and the world itself.



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