

## **“For the delectation of the file and rank”: Louis Zukofsky in the Later 1930s**

**Jeffrey Twitchell-Waas**

Despite a general consensus that Zukofsky’s later, post-World War II work is his major achievement, the earlier work, especially that of the 1930s, has always held a special fascination and attracted a disproportionate amount of academic attention. Any thumbnail biography of Zukofsky will likely mention that during this period he was a Marxist poet, even though the same could be said of most American writers and intellectuals of his generation, particularly of his class background. Nevertheless, this point has undoubtedly played a significant role in the critical recovery of Zukofsky and other Objectivists, fulfilling an academic desire for a more politically palatable heritage of experimental poetic modernism. Zukofsky’s designation as Marxist is not primarily due to any particular affiliation or declaration, nor could one divine a Marxist from his critical writings of the period, rather this attribution is based on his extensive incorporation of Marxist texts into several major works, particularly “A”-8 and the first half of “A”-9 but also *Arise, Arise* and a number of short poems. Although his use of such materials unquestionably signals an orientation and general allegiance in response to the crisis of the time, it is equally important to consider how he is attempting to preserve Marx from the Marxists, as an inside critique that attempts to deflect or bleed off the tendentious tendencies commonly taken as axiomatic by the politically committed. As he would put it in *A Test of Poetry*, poetry does not argue but convinces through its form and technique (*TP* 52, 78). But what does this mean?

A common narrative of Zukofsky’s poetic fate in the 1930s is that it begins with the aspiration to forge an modernist Marxist poetics which is predictably rejected or simply ignored by the organized Left that was his intended audience, eventually leading to his abandonment of political verse by the Second World War and a retreat into a more purely aesthetic and private focus with the settling in of the Cold War. As one often evoked authority sums up Zukofsky’s adventures with the Left, by 1935, “Zukofsky wrote for his desk drawer.”<sup>1</sup> Actually, at this time he was embarking on his most ambitious, most explicitly Marxist and publicly oriented work of his career. While it is true that the flurry of journal publications in the early 1930s slowed to a bare trickle in the latter half of the decade and to nothing at all in 1939-40, three drops of that trickle appeared in *New Masses*. Far more important, from 1935 to 1937 Zukofsky worked on the 60 plus page “A”-8 (published complete in *New Directions* 1938) and his play *Arise, Arise*, both unambiguously Leftist and public in their address, and surely deserving some consideration as among the most ambitious and accomplished works of American leftist literature of the period. The decade would be topped off with his condensed reworking of *Capital* in the first half of “A”-9 and finally “A”-10 (both published in 1941)<sup>2</sup>—the latter, despite its historical immediacy and formal accessibility, remains largely invisible to the mushrooming scholarship on American political

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<sup>1</sup> Eric Homberger, “Communists and Objectivists” in *The Objectivist Nexus: Essays in Cultural Poetics*, eds. Rachel Balu DuPlessis and Peter Quartermain (1999): 124.

<sup>2</sup> As is often mentioned, *The First Half of “A”-9* was self-published by Celia Zukofsky in an elaborate mimeographed edition in 1940 including numerous source texts incorporated into Zukofsky’s poem; however, the poem without the “aids” also appeared in *Poetry* the following year. Given the increasingly difficult circumstances over the course of the 1930s, especially for modernist poetry, it is surprising how successful Zukofsky was in promptly publishing his key poetic works in major venues: “Mantis” in *Poetry* (March 1935) and again with “Mantis’ An Interpretation” in *New Directions* (1936), “A”-8 complete in *New Directions* 1938, “A”-9 (First half) in *Poetry* (June 1941) and “A”-10 in *Calendar: An Anthology of 1941*, edited by Norman McLeod.

verse. Zukofsky was not writing for the desk drawer in the later 1930s, rather he was writing and publishing more extensive and public works that he knew full well would never gain approval from the more tendentious representatives of the Left nor from the increasingly conservative minders of modernism. The narrative of modernism versus political commitment, although constantly and passionately contested throughout this period, cannot be taken as an either/or question. Throughout this fractious decade, particularly during the Popular Front period (1934-1939), all manner of positions were debated and practiced by Leftist writers and intellectuals, including among members of the Communist Party.<sup>3</sup> Zukofsky was far from a loner in this debate, and there was never any reason for him to believe there was no space for the particular blend of modernism and politics he was attempting. The very ambition of the works he composed in the later 1930s indicates his determination to demonstrate poetic modernism's relevance.

What follows will consider a range of Zukofsky's critical interventions in the debate over modernism and politics to better understand how he situated himself within it. The most significant of these statements do not overtly bare their polemical concerns, not least because Zukofsky was arguing against argument, that is, against a tendentious art. It is not easy to situate Zukofsky intellectually during the 1930s, and despite Mark Scroggins' best efforts, our knowledge of his activities at this time remain sketchy.<sup>4</sup> He joined the League of American Writers when it was founded in 1935 and apparently was a member of its publishing committee, although how active this committee is difficult to determine. The League of American Writers was sponsored by the Communist Party, but was founded specifically as part of the Popular Front strategy against fascism and at least its public face was dominated by leftists of all stripes. Zukofsky even urged Pound to become a member (*SL* 122, 124-126). Also during this time Zukofsky worked voluntarily in the editorial offices of the *New Masses*, but aside from three small publications of his own as well as a substantial presentation of his "discovery," Robert Allan Evans, we have little idea of what he did. The *New Masses* always relied on such volunteer work from many writers, and from the evidence of his correspondence Zukofsky always held a low opinion of the main editors of the journal. One can speculate that these activities were motivated less by politics than the possibilities for publication of himself and like-minded friends during a period when publication of any kind was becoming extremely difficult. Zukofsky caught the bug from both Pound and Williams that the writer had a responsibility to actively create or influence publishing outlets in the cause of the new poetry. His correspondence with both elder poets as well as many others of the time is constantly preoccupied with published possibilities, and the decade was littered with stillborn publishing projects.<sup>5</sup>

A tentative sketch of Zukofsky's politics during the later 1930s would describe him as a fairly typical fellow traveler of the CP during the period of the Popular Front.<sup>6</sup> He

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<sup>3</sup> On the diversity of and debates among 1930s American leftist poets, see Cary Nelson, *Repression and Recovery: Modern American Poetry and the Politics of Cultural Memory, 1910-1945* (1989); Alan M. Wald, *Exiles from a Future Time: The Forging of the Mid-Twentieth-Century Literary Left* (2002); Alan Filreis, *Modernism from Right to Left: Wallace Stevens, the Thirties & Literary Radicalism* (1994). All of these scholars have produced further volumes on the topic, although none mention Zukofsky and the Objectivists more than in passing.

<sup>4</sup> Mark Scroggins, *The Poem of a Life: A Biography of Louis Zukofsky* (2007): 136-155.

<sup>5</sup> On the manifold publishing schemes of the decade, see particularly Tom Sharp, "The 'Objectivists' Publications," *Sagetrieb* 3.3 (Winter 1984): 41-47.

<sup>6</sup> The clearest statements we have of Zukofsky's politics views at this time appear in his correspondence with Pound and Kenneth Rexroth, who directly asked him where he stood.

consistently supported Stalin on pragmatic grounds: that the consolidation and defense of the Soviet project was paramount and the inevitability that the ultimate showdown would be between the competing revolutionary movements of communism and fascism. At the same time he expressed sympathy with Trotsky's insistence on the principle of world-wide revolution and regretted the internal conflict within the communist movement. In the Western and U.S. context, given the economic crisis, he assumed that radical change was inevitable, that communism was the most plausible program for the future, but was always skeptical and increasingly dismissive of all left leadership and organizations with which he had any contact and adamantly refused to compromise himself for the sake of a larger ideological cause. Indeed his admiration for Lenin as well as his own class background made him skeptical of all ideological debates among intellectuals, believing that the revolution would only come about when the workers themselves made it happen—in "A"-8 he gives some emphasis to both Lenin and Jefferson's pragmatic preparations for when the crucial moment of revolution arises. As we shall see in what follows, Zukofsky had no patience with theoretical debates among leftists and their accompanying power-struggles within the various organizations on the Left. Throughout the 1930s Zukofsky's economic situation, like that of so many others, was very precarious—a seemingly endless series of poorly paid and constantly shifting jobs. Most of these were with various government relief programs, which invariably had their own internal politics which he observed with growing cynicism. A substantial amount of what little he earned throughout this period went to his hard pressed family—an elderly father and older siblings. Such stressful and insecure circumstances allowed him little sustained time to work on his own writing, and his letters indicate his growing exasperation with both his own situation and that of the world at large.

One of the relatively few public responses to the Objectivists publications of 1931-32 was a dismissive review in *Poetry* by Morris U. Schappes, a professor at the City College of New York and Communist Party member. Schappes' basic argument is similar to that made familiar by Lukács against modernism: Zukofsky's insistence that "Objectivists" remain faithful to particulars is all too literally true, resulting in a radical nominalism where nothing coheres, images and words spin off into discrete meaninglessness, which is symptomatic of an underlying bourgeois malaise and nihilism that lacks any purchase for responding to current exigencies.<sup>7</sup> Zukofsky was provoked enough to respond with a letter to the editor, and although he does not effectively address Schappes' main argument, he makes several points.<sup>8</sup>

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Politically Rexroth was also a CP fellow traveler but with a strong dose of the Wobblies and anarchism more characteristic of many on the West coast, and therefore suspicious of East coast communists' more mainstream alignment with Stalin and the official CP line. For a detailed explanation of his position on Stalin in the immediate aftermath of news of the first show trial in 1936, see letter to Pound 9 Sept. 1936 (*SL* 153-158). Also Zukofsky's letters to Rexroth 22 March 1936, 20 June 1941, 23 June 1941, 1 July 1941 (*SL* 138-144, 186-200).

<sup>7</sup> Morris U. Schappes, "Historic and Contemporary Particulars," *Poetry* 41.6 (March 1933): 340-343. It would be unfair simply to write off Schappes (1907-2004) as a party hack. His commitment would be life-long, resulting in his dismissal from CCNY and imprisonment in 1941 for his refusal to name fellow party members. He was a founding member and long-time editor of the leftist magazine *Jewish Life*, was largely responsible as both editor and scholar in the rediscovery of the work of Emma Lazarus, as well as producing significant works on American Jewish history.

<sup>8</sup> "Objectivist Again," *Poetry* 42.2 (May 1933): 117. Zukofsky initially wrote a longer letter to the editors of *Poetry* dated 3 March 1933 (*SL* 90-94) that focuses more extensively on Schappes' inability to read beyond the content as statement.

First, he evokes the authority of Lenin to assert that the editorial presentation of *An "Objectivists" Anthology* offers an "objective estimate" that requires the reader to bring the various poems and statements into "reciprocal relations"; that is, the anthology is a construct whose complex of relations both internal and implicitly with the outside make a statement on contemporary poetry that cannot be reduced to a single reductive line of argument. The anthology maps a space of debate and possibilities for poetry rather than a particular ideological perspective. Schappes' idea of the poetic, Zukofsky adds, for all its presumed radicalism is the most conventional imaginable, lacking any appreciation of how poetic form complicates any statement of content. Finally, Zukofsky counters Schappes' recommendation of Louis Aragon's "The Red Front" as a model of politically relevant poetry by referring him to André Breton's critique of the "Aragon affair." As Schappes surely knew, Aragon was a particularly apt example as one of the founding members of Surrealism who subsequently embraced Communism and a poetics more compatible with such an allegiance after his visit to the Soviet Union in 1930, the occasion which inspired "The Red Front," whose revolutionary fervor promptly landed him in French court for advocating the overthrow of the state. Breton, whose aesthetics were based on the inherently rebellious nature of artistic activity, insisted in so many words that art is revolutionary but not political, in the sense of representing specific calls for practical action, so while Aragon may be a traitor to Surrealism, he could not, as an artist-poet, be a traitor to France.<sup>9</sup> Zukofsky was never particularly enamored of Surrealism, but his reference to Breton indicates not only his awareness of the larger debates concerning modernism and politics, but also his early resistance to the suggestion that the times demanded a more popular mode of expression. Zukofsky's defense against Schappes is not merely a plea for difference, but an insistence on poetry's immanent formal critique.

Zukofsky hardly needed Schappes' attack, which was not an isolated instance, to remind him that there was little chance of his work gaining approval from the more dogmatic elements of the Left. If there was a fundamental tension between poetry and politics—and all the furious critical debate of the period indicates that there was—then there can be little doubt that Zukofsky came to politics via poetry and not the other way around. To suggest that Zukofsky views Marxism as a discourse among others rather than as a paradigm to which all

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<sup>9</sup> Any history of Surrealism includes an account of the Aragon affair, but a standard one is that of Maurice Nadeau, *The History of Surrealism* (Trans. Richard Howard, 1965), which usefully includes a partial translation of Breton's 1932 article on the case that Zukofsky is probably referring to (296-303). Aragon's poem had an interesting life in English translation, which demonstrates the unpredictable relations between modernism and politics at the time. E.E. Cummings translated the poem during his own trip to the U.S.S.R. in the summer of 1931 at the request of the Revolutionary Literature Bureau and as a favor to Aragon, who had given him a letter of introduction to his sister-in-law (Mayakovsky's muse Lilya Brik, but when Cummings met her she was recently married to General Vitali Primakov) in Moscow. Cummings' own view of the poem is expressed in his scathing journal-novel of his trip, *Eimi* (1933), in which he mentions his struggles translating the poem, which he describes as "mostly a hyper2fisted supergoetting ultaredblooded certificate of Mme. P.'s soeur's mari's conversion And How" (138). Cummings' translation was first published in 1931 in *Contempo*, a Leftist little magazine that had previously published Zukofsky. One admirer of "The Red Front" was Pound, also a big fan of Cummings' *Eimi*, who praises the poem in his own book on revolution, *Jefferson and/or Mussolini* (1935), and included it in his anthology of contemporary verse, *Active Anthology* (Faber, 1932), next to his selections of Zukofsky. A translation of Aragon's account of his conversion, "From Dada to Red Front," appeared in *New Masses* 15.7 (14 May 1935): 23-24.

other discourses must be assimilated is merely to assert what is commonly taken to be Zukofsky's distinctive stance within modernism: his insistence on the materiality of language, rather than as a vehicle for expression or representation as conventionally understood. He came to this position early through a systematic critical assessment of his modernist predecessors, which can be understood as a rigorous demystification process, the cleaning up of the residual expressive and symbolist elements in the elder poets resulting in a strictly secular and materialist poetics that takes a historicist perspective on all instances of language production. When Zukofsky was carrying out this critical assessment over the course of the late 1920s, he was no doubt aware of Marx, but there is little evidence that Marxism was a determining influence on the formative development of Zukofsky's poetics. On the other hand, he took for granted the intersection of politics and poetry before the onset of the Depression, which is particularly evident in the cluster of work he published in *Exile 4* (1928) as a follow-up to "Poem beginning 'The,'" advocating an apocalyptic radicalism informed by John Bunyan and Georges Sorel and shot through with class resentment.<sup>10</sup> Without denying that Zukofsky's interest in Marx undoubtedly reflects the tenor and pressures of the 1930s, he develops various formal strategies that deflect and complicate the tendentious propensity such materials would normally have been expected to carry.

Some indication of Zukofsky's position is provided by a letter critiquing "Marxian" criticism addressed to Kenneth Burke, Isidor Schneider and Edwin Burgum, presumably responding to a debate within the editorial board of the League of American Writers.<sup>11</sup> As was already a critical habit with Zukofsky, he makes his point primarily through a montage of quotations—there are seven quotations plus two paraphrases in the two page letter. Zukofsky begins by offering his "'Mantis,' An Interpretation" as a contribution to the discussion and asserts that the "poetic" is never divorced from the "critical process"—I will return to this in a moment.

The bulk of the letter centers around a quotation from the text (apparently by Burgum) that presumably initiated the debate asserting that "Marxian criticism" could not exist before the discovery of dialectical materialism had thoroughly penetrated into the current stage of society, and therefore an entirely authentic Marxian criticism still awaits its proper historical moment. Zukofsky detects here a common teleological conception of historical materialism that he would always firmly reject. He makes his critique by sandwiching the quotation between two further quotations by Marx and Engels respectively. First, abstractions do not

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<sup>10</sup> Zukofsky originally sent Pound a group of "18 Poems to the Future" with a preface, each poem had a quotation from *Pilgrim's Progress* as an epigraph, but Pound was not impressed. In the end, he printed the preface and one of the poems, "Constellation" (later "Memory of V.I. Ulianov" [i.e. Lenin]), plus a review of E.E. Cummings' *Him* and two bitter verse essays—one a review of George Antheil's first American performance of *Ballet Mécanique*, which Williams also attended and reported on in "George Antheil and the Cantilene Critics." The preface and the two verse essays evidence a violence and resentment that has some resemblance to the attitudinizing of "Poem beginning 'The,'" but which would thereafter disappear, and Zukofsky never reprinted these three pieces. The review of Cummings was eventually reprinted in *Prepositions* (1967), but it was considerably toned down when Zukofsky edited it for the collection.

<sup>11</sup> Letter dated 1 March 1936 (*SL* 134-136). The precise context to which Zukofsky is responding is uncertain, but in a letter to Pound (18 Jan. 1936, *SL* 126) a few months previous Zukofsky announced that he was a member of the editorial committee of the League of American Writers and lists both Burke and Burgum as among its members, whereas Schneider was an editor of *New Masses*.

precede and give rise to social development but necessarily arise within the latter, so Burgum's conception of "Marxian criticism" puts the cart before the horse, assuming an entity prior to its material possibility. This is a critique of abstraction, or more precisely of a common use of abstraction, that Zukofsky will rehearse repeatedly in *Bottom*: the error of projecting an abstract endpoint that is then imposed back onto the particulars to explain the cause of that abstraction. The Engels quotation follows up Marx's point by simply pointing out that the ideas of any historical period necessarily include and develop from those of earlier periods, therefore, Zukofsky adds, "Marxian criticism" has always existed, and he offers as samples a couple quotations from Longinus and Dante followed by further snippets from Marx and Engels. Zukofsky, then, rejects the myth of progress, the assumption that history develops teleologically, which at the time was virtually synonymous with "dialectical materialism" as well as other ideological positions on the right and center. The past is never rendered obsolete or simply transcended, and if Zukofsky maintained a conception of revolution it was on the order of an enlargement of the past's presence in the present, that is, the recuperation of the past as missed or repressed potential. Zukofsky's more general point is that a materialist (or "Marxian") criticism is not a matter of a correct ideological attitude but of considering the specificity of a given text in specific contexts, how do the particulars of a text necessarily relate to the particularity of its circumstances.

At around the same time Zukofsky assembled the never published *A Workers Anthology*, which presented short selections of poetry from Ovid through the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century in chronological order to demonstrate, so his brief preface suggests, that poetry of social critique has never been incompatible with being good poetry.<sup>12</sup> He evokes the authority of Lenin to assert that art has its role in the revolutionary struggle to both unite the masses and raise their consciousnesses as artistes, that is, non-exploitative labor is identical with or at least involves artistic activity. As far as I know, this three sentence paragraph is the most Marxist sounding statement Zukofsky ever wrote. He also includes a number of brief commentaries in the form of notes to help the reader draw out the implied social critique of certain poems. Clearly this anthology was directed toward a leftist readership with a polemical intent: revolutionary poetry can embody high aesthetic values and traditional poetry has not been rendered obsolete by history.

The opening gambit of Zukofsky's letter to Burke, Schneider and Burgum, where he offers "'Mantis,' An Interpretation" as his contribution to the debate is worth further examination. His suggestion that the "critical" can never be entirely divorced from the "poetic" implies a mutually defining pair of terms where the "poetic" is that which often eludes or is repressed by the "critical"—the perennial problem of the relation of aesthetics to its object—but where the poetic may be the initial impulse that sets off the "critical" in the first place. While Zukofsky is specifically defending "'Mantis,' An Interpretation" as a critical intervention, the text is a hybrid text that is deliberately ambiguous as to whether it is to be read as a poem or an essay, and the critical choice a reader makes to this question will considerably determine its reading.

"An Interpretation" opens with a phrase from Dante with its translation: "names are sequent to the things named" (CSP 67). Within the political context of the time, this is clearly

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<sup>12</sup> The preface is dated 8 March 1935. Apparently the only surviving typescript of *A Worker's Anthology* is that in the Basil Bunting Archive at Durham University. Most of the selections of poetry ended up in the very differently conceived *A Test of Poetry*. For a list of the contents, see the page on *A Test of Poetry* at the Z-site. Precisely why Zukofsky embarked on this project remains unclear, but one imagines he was responding to the flurry of anthologies of political poetry that appeared in the early 1930s (see Cary Nelson, *Revolutionary Memory: Recovering the Poetry of the American Left* (2002): 141-180).

enough a declaration for materialism, as well as sounding like a forerunner of Williams' "no ideas but in things." Zukofsky clearly saw no incompatibility between dialectical materialism as he understood it and Imagist or Pound/Williams poetics. The main burden of "An Interpretation" is to defend or explain the use of the seemingly obsolete sestina form in "Mantis" proper. But Zukofsky is less interested in defending the sestina form per se than recovering a sense of why the form might have been invented in the first place, that is, the formal expression of a complex of thought-feeling. In other words, we have here an example of Zukofsky's idea of materialist criticism that attempts to reveal the specific conditions that give rise to a particular form, and to the degree that one is successful in doing so, that form becomes available for the present poet confronted with formally analogous circumstances. Zukofsky is not concerned with the poetic form as the expression of a specific socio-economic circumstance, but as an emotional structure and complex. Dante uses the discourse of love in his sestina, while Zukofsky deploys what might be called various sociological discourses in his. However, for Dante, as for Cavalcanti, the discourse of love is anything but mere self-expression, but implicates everything as the entirety of his poetic work testifies. Zukofsky always quaintly insisted that love was central to all his work, but his sense of the term was Dantean not its usual modern assertion of the self against the social. When Cavalcanti's poetic treatise on love is translated in the first half of "A"-9 in Marx's terms, the poem still speaks of love, as the second half makes explicit. Zukofsky's sestina can legitimately be read as a love poem, in the Dantean sense, although his historical circumstances seem to demand a different discourse. But the primary expressiveness of "Mantis" is not so much its theme(s) or specific discourses as the complex expressed by its formal structure. Zukofsky gives some emphasis to the importance of repetition in this complex: repetition as memory and as the struggle and realization of form. The sestina, so Zukofsky suggests, maintains the sense of this complex as active process, every step or word forward tends to coil back as well as ahead and the sestina form always emphasizes repetition with often surprising differences. "Process" is a term Zukofsky frequently used during this time, occasionally substituting it for "dialectics," a term he rarely used—probably because "dialectical materialism" tended to have teleologically determinative implications. He insists that the mantis in the poem is not a symbol but that the poet's sudden encounter with the insect evokes the complex of feelings, pity and fright, analogous to the dominant social fact of the historical moment, the growing presence of the poor. The implication appears to be that the latter social fact conditions the poet's reaction to the mantis. Thus the sestina is not self-contained, it coils outward as well as inward. Zukofsky gives a list of notes to various images and lines, which in part is pedantically parodic since surely he is not suggesting the reader look up, say, Melanesian mythology to throw light on the poem (Zukofsky is undoubtedly mocking "The Waste Land" notes here). But at the same time these notes suggest there is no bottom to the social sedimentation of the poem's language.

A basic tenet of Zukofsky's poetics was a resistance to the predatory tendencies of abstraction and the effort to remain in or renew a sense of existing among particulars, always to a greater or lesser degree unique and individual. Yet, precisely because all of this is socially mediated, it is not a matter of a simple antithesis, of choosing one over the other since the terms necessarily define each other. As Zukofsky remarks near the end of "Mantis," "An Interpretation," the intention is to conjure the collective without a loss of sensual awareness, ideas that embody the tactile, which he equates by juxtaposition with Marx's use value, a relationship with the material in which one recognizes simultaneously the self and the collective (*CSP* 72). For Zukofsky, use value (and Marx's materialist thought in general) always implied the sensual and an ethical relation between bodies—in this respect obviously informed by Spinoza as well. What is at stake, therefore, is not a particular political ideology or commitment so much as that contact with a sense of existence that gives rise to the

political in the first place: the individual's sense of obstruction and disability encountered from without that inhibits a sense of self-realization, including the possibilities for collaborative engagement. This experience of frustration as well as its potential overcoming is itself mediated and given form through the social totality, but Zukofsky's insistence is that poetry and art, or labor more broadly, must maintain and enact a renewed sense of existence as an activity with and among particulars and others. Marx's account of the labor process and of commodification interested Zukofsky as a particularly powerful account of the effects of social abstraction: labor, by which he understood human activity in general, is properly a process of self-realization through interaction with the world, which the mechanisms of capitalism turn against itself for the purposes of exploiting the many for the benefit of the few.

### **“Modern Times” and “inventive existence”**

Although hardly recognized as such, Zukofsky did attempt a public critical intervention on the question of art and politics in two pieces written in the mid-1930s: a brief review of Lewis Carroll's Russian journal published in *New Masses* and an essay on Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times*, which for reasons so far unexplained remained unpublished until 1961. Written at the time Zukofsky was beginning work on his most explicitly political works, both pieces begin by insisting that whatever the author's thoughts or beliefs is of no consequence to their work, which may sound like a typical modernist advocacy of impersonality but surely in the context of *New Masses* was meant as a challenge to readers' usual assumptions. In both of these pieces, Zukofsky rejects the conception of art as primarily a vehicle for ideas, or even of plot and character development as normally understood, instead arguing for a work's immanent social critique. Zukofsky is interested in the political prior to specific beliefs or conscious ideology—he refers to the latter disparagingly as “attitude” (*Prep*+ 59)—the lived experience that gives rise to the political in the first place. Towards the end of the essay on Chaplin, Zukofsky gives a cluster of quotations from Dante which concludes: “Everything that moves, moves for the sake of something which it has not, and which is the goal of its motion; ... Everything that moves, then, has some defect, and does not grasp its whole being at once” (63). Desire endeavoring to realize itself invariably encountering limitations and frustrations is the grounds of the political. The work of art's politics must properly tap into this sense of the immediate, even physiological grounds of our aspirations, frustrations and modes of negotiation if we are to avoid the “predatory interests” (63) of abstractions, whatever their political sentiments. The realization of the self cannot separate itself from the realization of one's world, “inextricably the direction of historic and contemporary particulars” (12); indeed, it necessarily takes place in the dialectical interaction with the world, so the art work cannot merely represent but must enact that worldly engagement, the effort to realize “whole being.”

The brief review of Lewis Carroll first points out that Carroll refused to confirm whether his nonsense meant anything, preferring to let the nonsense speak for itself (*Prep*+ 65). Zukofsky then refers to a few brief examples from *Alice in Wonderland* with obvious political and economic implications, and concludes with four quotations from the volume under review without further comment. The last three, taken from Carroll's *Journal of a Tour in Russia in 1867*, ideographically suggest the social conditions that lead to the Revolutions of 1905 and 1917, including a snapshot of a boy thief being marched off to court or prison between two soldiers. The political here is less a matter of parties, programs and slogans, than the perception of particular instances of injustice and authoritarianism that imply a systemic social malfunction. Again we recognize that even in this brief review the presentation—minimal personal statement and maximum foregrounding of quotations—as typically



Zukofskian, eschewing polemics to locate the question of politics in the act of perception and reading.

The essay on Charlie Chaplin is far more ambitious and arguably a more coherent expression of Zukofsky's poetics than the better known Objectivist statements of a few years previous. Recently the piece has attracted attention for its views on film and montage, but if we plug it back into its time, we recognize that the primary concern of the essay is the question of political art. However since Zukofsky is advocating a non-tendentious art, he develops a manner that tends to elide explicit argument so that the progression from sentence to sentence or paragraph to paragraph is often less than self-evident. What particularly attracted Zukofsky to film was its powerful visceral effect, its dynamic immediacy, which communicated beyond a reliance on the relatively abstract matters of plot, character and thematic development—elements that from Zukofsky's perspective encouraged reductive and ossifying perspectives. We can recognize here Zukofsky's loyalty to the immediacy and intensification of Imagism, but with the imagistic moment(s) pulled up into the formal structure of the work itself: it is not film's special capacity to convey a reality effect per se that interests Zukofsky but the powerful sensuality of the medium especially in its kinetic effect, whether that is located in Chaplin's eloquent, always physiological engagement with his world or in the formal dynamicism of montage. Essentially Zukofsky argues for an art whose form presents a complex of relations that does not represent so much as enact a sense of existence in and with the world: "an intelligence working itself out in the concrete" (60). Art is effectively political if it enacts "inventive existence," a sense of expansive being in the given world, which will inevitably highlight those forces that arbitrarily limit its possibilities—"Satire: emphasizing insistence of intelligence in men affected by obverse events and driving to a new physical reality" (59-60).

Zukofsky begins his essay by evoking perhaps the most overtly political scene in *Modern Times*, where Chaplin is seen leading a demonstration with a red flag in his hand, then once again adds that whatever Chaplin's ideas or opinions they are none of our concern (57). In fact the movie presents the Tramp's heading of the demonstration of workers as a perfectly fortuitous event: Chaplin is merely holding a flag that fell off a truck by accident when suddenly crowds of workers surge out of the side streets and form behind him in one of the more remarkable scenes of the film. This scene might just as easily be read as a comment on the mindlessness of crowd behavior, than as a statement of allegiance to the working class. Nevertheless, if the conjunction of Chaplin and the workers is fortuitous within the film as narrative, it obviously is not, as Zukofsky points out, within the formal structure of the film as a constructed object. Although Chaplin's films are frequently criticized for their loose, strung together plots on the assumption that they ought to be proper narratives, Zukofsky saw them as rigorous performances of an everyman at every moment striving to realize his desire, creatively interacting with and transforming his social world, without, however, representing or imposing any preconceived idea about that world. Zukofsky would direct our attention away from the narrative illusionism of film—character and plot development or thematic interpretations—to the formal constructiveness of the work, to the juxtapositions and relations created by the formal composition of shots and their sequencing as montage. He is dismissive of the thematic, such as that modernity mechanizes humanity (59). "Material thoughtfulness" insists on our immanent existence in the world, necessarily defined through and against things and others, just as the Objectivist poem is an object made from and defined in relation to particulars.

The Chaplin essay circles around the insistence that ideas ought not drive the film, arguing that in a Chaplin film ideas are "inventive existence interacting with other existence in all its ramifications: sight, hearing, muscular movement, coordination of all the senses acting on the surrounding world and rendering it laughably intelligent" (60). This in fact is a

succinct statement of Zukofsky's own poetics, even politics, which he will state repeatedly in *Bottom*. Chaplin's tramp is an artist, as we all ideally are, practical creators within and with the givens of the world, realizing our utopian desires whose perfection or realization is defined as the maximization of all of our senses fully coordinated with, indeed indistinguishable from the intellect. Zukofsky is critical of the films of the Surrealists and of René Clair precisely because they are too driven by ideas, in the case of the latter on an excess of "attitude," which results in social satire that is reductively simplistic and inert. In the case of the Surrealists the prime target is bourgeois morality, religion and sex, while for Clair is it class differences, but in either case it is as if everything has been decided in advance, so to speak, so that the films merely play out variations on the same predictable assumptions, creating pre-canned satiric effects. In contrast Chaplin depicts people in their social "masks" acting passively as determined by larger social forces or actively as they act on what is imaginatively possible (59). The objection here is not to class analysis per se—presumably the "masks" carry class markings—but rather the ossification of class categories as if they were somehow imposed on characters rather than depicting class itself as performed, either as acting on or determined by the given actors.

But this too risks reducing Chaplin and Zukofsky's argument to themes and abstractions, and we need finally to reemphasize that the effect of the work is less a matter of internal analysis than the affect on the viewer-reader of the formal body of the work, which is why film is a particularly useful example: "If the spectator is intent on the film and not on his own thought, what can the action of the shot mean but what it *does*—i.e. *performs*" (64). Zukofsky touches at several points on montage, equating it with "material thoughtfulness," which he curiously associates with the term "sportsmanship." The fairness of sportsmanship dictates that everything must be shown in relation (61). We are familiar enough with the idea of montage or collage as a more egalitarian method that presents rather than says, building larger meanings through dynamic juxtaposition without subsuming the integrity of the individual components under overarching abstractions. Zukofsky's emphasis on sportsmanship and fairness, as well as on dynamic complexes of relations can be understood as another dig at tendentious art and an insistence that any position is structurally defined by its opposites and alternatives. Even more important is Zukofsky's insistence that montage "performs" relations and context, which is more than merely representing the complex of actual events, but also a matter of felt form, the enactment of "inventive existence" within a structure of relations that defines both its possibilities and limitations. Zukofsky will pursue the poetic implications of this position throughout the rest of his life, but for the moment we will simply point out that Zukofsky conceives of the poetic object as sensually engaging the poet-reader-viewer with the intention of mutual self-realization—both mediated through the social whole.

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