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Comparisons and Criteria: Testing *A Test of Poetry*

“I believe in technique as the test of a man’s sincerity” (9) declares Ezra Pound in his “Credo.” Over thirty years later, in 1948, Louis Zukofsky publishes *A Test of Poetry*, a groundbreaking anthology and textbook of poetics largely derived from Pound’s declaration and similar statements scattered throughout his early literary essays. Zukofsky’s book also owes a good deal to Pound’s *ABC of Reading* (1934), particularly the “Exhibits” section that constitutes about half of the *ABC*. But Zukofsky, however great his debt to Pound, is a more refined, and certainly a more organized maker. Tight, symmetrical, and transparently structured, *A Test* has the look of a textbook by a recently appointed instructor at Brooklyn Polytech, rather than that of a student at the Ezuversity in Rapallo. Always the minimalist even in his more expansive works, always the student of the microscopic, Zukofsky understands to an even greater extent than his mentor that, as he puts it, “a poem is an emotional object defined not by the beliefs it deals with, but by its *technique* and the *poetic conviction or mastery* with which these beliefs are expressed” (*A Test* 78). Pound and Zukofsky share the notion that technique and conviction go hand-in-hand, though it may be that Zukofsky holds even more rigorously to what Mark Scroggins calls an “ideology of the poet as craftsman, rather than expressive vessel” (23). Aspiring poets who long to express their beliefs or emotions—who are moved, to use that privileged term, by sincerity—do best by developing technical mastery. And that mastery may be acquired through the comparative study of poetic examples, arranged so as to produce what Zukofsky calls “standards,” evaluative criteria that may be defined and categorized.

Following Pound, who is given to drawing analogies between poetry and the hard sciences, the inductive procedure which Zukofsky codifies in *A Test of Poetry* has the appearance of objective research, an appearance that the epigraphs from Michael Faraday, the nineteenth-century British physicist, would seem to support. The oddly termed “considerations” listed at the end of *A Test of Poetry*, derived from the comparisons in the anthology sections of the book, seem to be stable poetic categories: this set of passages teaches us about “Speech,” that one provides concrete instances of “Measure,” the following one gives us specimens of “Sound,” the one after that shows us—“Worldliness”? And how about “Emotion”? “Inevitability”? “Conviction”? Zukofsky never directly explains the connections between the sets of poems and the categories they are meant to illustrate, nor does he explicitly define the categories themselves. But even if he had, we would still be in the realm of what has traditionally been termed “taste,” however compelling Zukofsky’s comparative, and apparently objective method may be.

Here we come to an important point, a point through which we may see the enduring value of *A Test of Poetry*. Despite Zukofsky's desire for a system of poetics analogous to objective scientific procedures, the comparisons of the sort that he designs actually allow for a great range of subjective responses. This is true not only in regard to readers' preferences within a particular Zukofskian "consideration" ("In this set, I prefer the way Shakespeare conveys 'Emotion' to the way Milton does"), but just as importantly, in regard to the overall worth of the comparative sets based on other, additional poetic considerations that each set may generate ("This comparison is meant to teach us about 'emotion', but it also teaches us about 'energy', 'duration', 'intellection', etc."). And this in turn has everything to do with Zukofsky's genius for choosing texts, some well-known and others much less so (such as those by fellow objectivists Niedecker and Reznikoff), that are highlighted in just such a way as to demonstrate their unique features with the maximum comprehensibility. Indeed, Zukofsky's understanding of how a "poetry anthology" should work has little to do with the organizational principles of any anthology before or since, whether constructed historically, thematically, structurally or stylistically. Even Donald Allen's *The New American Poetry*, an equally famous and probably more influential work, despite the brilliance of poem after poem and the revolutionary use of statements on poetics by the authors themselves, seems somewhat conventional in comparison to Zukofsky's book. As a pedagogical instrument for the aspiring poet *and* as an anthology demonstrating, to use Robert Scholes' useful term, the "textual power" of both canonical and new poems, *A Test of Poetry* achieves an extraordinary balance between the editor's pointed guidance and the reader's self-reliant explorations. "This book," writes Robert Creeley, "is no anthology or any such generalizing collection of texts. It is a continual process of selection, of weighing alternatives, and becomes a *common book* of self-determined and tested examples" ("Foreward" viii). Or as Zukofsky puts it in his Preface, "I believe that desirable teaching assumes intelligence that is free to be attracted from any consideration of every day living to always another phase of existence" (xi).

The dialectical interplay of subjectivity and objectivity embodied by *A Test of Poetry*, the method that the student poet is to follow in learning to make evaluative judgments, owes a great deal to a particular understanding of poetic tradition, and here again, we must look back to Pound. "The tradition is a beauty which we preserve and not a set of fetters to bind us" (91), Pound writes in 1913, and in another essay of the same year, beautifully develops this concept as follows: "The so-called major poets have most of them given their *own* gift but the peculiar term 'major' is rather a gift to them from Chronos. I mean that they have been born upon the stroke of their hour and that it has been given them to heap together and arrange and harmonize the results of many men's labour. This very faculty for amalgamation is a part of their genius and it is, in a way, a sort of modesty, a sort of unselfishness. They have not wished for property" (48-49).

In addition to this being the best refutation I know of Harold Bloom's theory of influence, it has, I believe, a profound effect on Zukofsky's thinking about poetic history and heritage. The effectiveness of the poetry presented in *A Test of Poetry* as comparisons of objective technique is premised on the notion that poetic tradition constitutes a continuum of discourse which individual poets continue to find useful. Its beauty lies in part in the way it gives itself to a continual rearranging and reharmonizing of its linguistic material by an series of devoted, unselfish individual workers in the craft. Thus after citing translations by Sidney and Byron of a passage from Catallus which the Latin poet derives from Sappho, Zukofsky comments that "Evidently there must be some living poetic matter in the poem of Sappho which has attracted the attention of other poets," and

concludes that “A valuable poetic tradition does not gather mold; it has continuous life based on work of permanent interest (quality)” (56).

“Only emotion endures” (14) Pound famously announces; “As poetry, only objectified emotion endures” (87) answers Zukofsky in *A Test*. Here we see again the delicate balance between subjective and objective perspectives on how poetry comes to be written, or, if you will, the balance between Zukofsky the idealist and Zukofsky the pragmatist. On the one hand, poetry has a kind of emotional essence which is embodied in a particular text but may also be passed on from poet to poet, poem to poem. On the other hand, this enduring emotional continuum depends on objectification, the making of the linguistic artifact dependent upon the individual poet’s technical ability. Distinguishing between Zukofsky’s understanding of tradition and that of T. S. Eliot in “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” Mark Scroggins observes that “The tradition in which the poet enters is not an ideal order of monuments but a series of repetitions, a series of replowings by various writers of a single ‘ground’, and an assurance that, even though the poet’s work might echo in particulars some text he has never before read, that work has not been in vain if performed in a spirit of dedication and ‘sincerity’” (137).

Once more we encounter “sincerity,” a term never absent from any aspect of Zukofsky’s work. Though, as I indicated earlier, it appears that Pound first gives the word its current charge, it is Zukofsky, in using it to theorize objectivism as a newly-minted movement, who claims it for his own. “In sincerity shapes appear concomitants of word combinations, precursors or (if there is continuance) completed sound or structure, melody or form. Writing occurs which is the detail, not mirage, of seeing, of thinking with the things as they exist, and of directing them along a line of melody” (*Prepositions* + 12). It is worth returning to this definition, endlessly interpreted by a number of generations of Zukofsky critics, simply to remind ourselves that sincerity is immediately and always linked to technique, to matters of word combinations, detail, and melody. We should also remind ourselves that however many considerations or categories Zukofsky generates in *A Test of Poetry*, the test itself “is the range of pleasure it affords as sight, sound, and intellection. This is its purpose as art” (*Test* xi). “Sight, sound, and intellection” is Zukofsky’s plain rendering of the Poundian *phanopœia*, *melopœia*, and *logopœia*, which are, in effect, the three basic ways in which poetry is “charged or energized” (*Literary Essays* 25). For both poets, these are objective qualities: they may be precisely located within the verses of a poem, in its rhythm, its image casting, its play of syllable against syllable.

We see this to be the case if we examine even one of Zukofsky’s considerations, for instance, the quality in lyric poetry that he calls “grace.” Zukofsky’s seven examples of grace in his comparisons are typical of his selection process: in Part I there are two poems by Herrick and Zukofsky’s own “Little Wrists”; in Part II there are two more poems by Herrick; and in Part III there is a poem by Campion and one by Sir Francis Kynaston. Zukofsky usually presents specimens from the canon which a reader would usually associate with the consideration he wishes to analyze, and indeed, one would be hard pressed to find more graceful stylists in the English tradition than Herrick or Campion. But he almost always throws us a curve as well: hence Kynaston, a decidedly minor seventeenth-century poet, with his charming though somewhat conventional “To Cynthia, On Concealment of her Beauty”; and Zukofsky’s own “Little Wrists,” with its unquestionably delicate but nonetheless quirky rhythm and syntax. That Zukofsky would include an obscure contemporary of two acknowledged masters, and then add his own poem to the mix, indicates that, as Robert Creeley observes, “One hears in the possibility another has articulated

what may thus bring clear one's own, and though there are three hundred years intervening, the measure of grace is not variable" ("A Note" 60). According to Zukofsky, "Poetry convinces not by argument but by the *form* it creates to carry its content" (52). In the *Test*, Zukofsky's formalism or structuralism is related to the synchronous nature of his method. He diachronically juxtaposes examples from different periods in history in order to demonstrate that technique, the perfection of form, actually cuts across time and is not primarily historical. "*Trust in good verses, then;*" goes his epigraph from Herrick: and "good verses" will appear wherever, whenever, and by whomever they may be found and ascertained.

Zukofsky's succinct comparison of Herrick's "Violets" and "To Keep a True Lent" focuses equally on sight, sound, and intellection in order to determine how Herrick achieves his graceful forms. He pays particular attention to rhyme, noting that in "Violets," even heavy words like *respected* and *neglected* are lightly resolved, while in "To Keep a True Lent," one-syllable words (which are presumably lighter) are rhymed more emphatically, staccato, for heavier emphasis. The former poem is written to be sung, and presents clear images of flowers, metaphorically transformed into the Spring's maidens-in-waiting who are doomed to fade and die. The latter, a religious poem of what Zukofsky calls "more involved matter," embodies "spoken righteous indignation" and employs seemingly "non-poetic" words like *larder*, *fat* (as a noun), *veals* and *platter*. Yet according to Zukofsky, the effect is still one "of resonant, impassioned diction," with single words in "To Keep a True Lent" given "more volume" than those in "Violets." The point, ultimately, is that whether the subject is springtime flowers or religious controversy, "Condensation is more than half of composition. The rest is proper breathing, space, ease, grace" (81). In addition, "any word may be poetic if used in the right order, with the right cadence, with a definite aim in view" (80-81). As an aesthetic quality, grace may be produced through technical mastery whether the subject is regarded as conventionally "graceful" or not.

Given Zukofsky's commentary, it's worth testing the *Test* and its poet/editor by looking at "Little Wrists," which he includes as an example of grace. As I noted earlier, "Little Wrists" is a delicate but quirky poem. Written in January 1948, just months before the first publication of *A Test*, it may have been included in the book as a replacement for an Emily Dickinson poem which carried too high a permissions fee for Zukofsky to include. In the collection *Some Time*, it appears as the first part of the two-part poem "So That Even a Lover." Both parts of the poem appear to be about Zukofsky's young son Paul (b. 1943), and my guess is that "Little Wrists" refers to the child's delicate wrists as he plays the violin:

Little wrists,
Is your content
My sight or hold
Or your small air
That lights and trysts?
Red alder berry
Will singly break;
But you—how slight—do:
So that even

A lover exists. (*A Test* 29)

If “Condensation is more than half of composition,” especially in a graceful lyric, then Zukofsky in this poem certainly practices what he preaches, as the syntax is very condensed, achieving a fruitful ambiguity of meaning while simultaneously producing a high degree of musicality. The ten-line poem, divided into two five-lines stanzas, is perfectly anchored by the rhyme on *wrists*, *trysts*, and *exists* at lines one, five and ten. A number of the words, given the syntactic condensation, are notably polysemous: *content* could be the noun indicating meaning or significance, but is more likely the shortened form of *contentment*; *lights* and *trysts* seem to be operating as verbs; *do* appears to refer back to the predicate *singly break*, but could also refer to an entirely different and unspecified action. The poem also makes use of internal rhyme (*sight / lights*) and a high degree of consonance, especially through the use of words with “s” and “l” sounds. In every respect, the poem passes the test of poetry regarding sight, sound, and intellection. The sight of the boy’s wrists as he practices charms his father, and reminds him, metaphorically, of the “Red alder berry” that may “singly break.” The “small air” or musical composition he plays, which “lights and trysts,” is transformed into the sound effects of the lyric. The overall gracefulness of conception and execution is all the more impressive given the quickness of Zukofsky’s perception of the moment.

“Will you give yourself airs / from that lute of Zukofsky?” asks Robert Duncan in his audacious “After Reading *Barely and Widely*”; “In comely pairs // the words courteously dancing, to lose the sense . . .” (90). Duncan, another extraordinary lyric poet trained to recognize the Poundian *phanopœia*, *melopœia*, and *logopœia*, instantly recognized Zukofsky’s power and grace. His mellifluous homage, which riffs wildly on Zukofsky’s Jewish identity in tension with Duncan’s own fascination with Jewish, Christian, and pagan hermeticism, is one of many testaments of the poets, often of different and even clashing styles and schools, who would give themselves airs from Zukofsky’s lute. Duncan’s pun is perfectly apt: to give oneself airs is to appropriate the music, but also to presume to understand the master’s lessons. Indeed, the competing claims to Zukofsky’s inheritance (claims which I’m sure will crop up from time to time at this conference) could be tempered, could be eased, by turning to his textbook, where, as I’ve tried to point out, the concept of poetic tradition or heritage is treated with an unprecedented and liberal generosity. In *A Test*, as Pound would say, poetry is not property; the categories it offers are recapitulated through poetic tradition, and continue to appear in all sorts of combinations and permutations.

I’d like to conclude then, by turning to a singular figure among Zukofsky’s presumptive heirs, a poet who may not immediately come to mind in this context, but is the only poet I know who actually went to school not merely with Zukofsky’s textbook but with the author himself. I refer to Hugh Seidman, who as a young student of mathematics at Brooklyn Polytech, took Zukofsky’s courses and worked with him on the college literary magazine and poetry club from 1958 to 1961. According to Seidman’s memoir of those years, Zukofsky offered a poetry seminar at Poly using *A Test of Poetry* as a text. His teaching “combined an extreme philosophical brilliance with a profound sensitivity that seemed remarkable in one so learned” (98). “I must simply say that I loved him,” writes Seidman; “He was my poetic father who initiated me into the vision of the poem as a sacred and all pervading act. My debt to him is unpayable, and I have never forgotten the lesson of his commitment. More and more I tried to imitate his spare precise style” (100).

Indeed, Seidman learned his lessons well. Not only did Zukofsky instill in him a love for the man and the art, but just as importantly, he pointed him down the road toward the technical mastery we see in Seidman's work today. Like his mentor, Seidman is essentially a minimalist; his sequences, usually no more than a few pages, are built out of small lyric units, each one meticulously constructed, highly condensed, and charged with the same quirky grace. From "Composition: 3 Poems," a set from the forthcoming *Somebody Stand Up and Sing*, comes the timely "Search Engine: Google":

So much talk when cut
is the task. *N* billion sites
passed so fast. Make words
what but past! Sent, saved, archived,
cataloged draft—fame at last!

A long essay could be written on Seidman's appropriation of Zukofskyan technique. Here I only wish to point out the asymmetrical use of rhyme and off rhyme that provides this small poem's sturdy skeleton—*task, passed, fast, past, draft, last*—and the impacted, telegraphic syntax in enjambed phrases like "when cut / is the task" and "Make words // what but past." It embodies the same sense of grace as "Little Wrists." This thoroughly ironic poem about composition, posterity, and fame draws its theme from poetry's earliest task, its struggle against oblivion, yet its point of departure is utterly contemporary. I think it would pass muster in *A Test of Poetry*.

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