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## Louis Zukofsky and the Avant-Garde Textbook

“What we need is a literary scholarship, which will weigh Theocritus and Yeats with one balance,” because “all ages are contemporaneous.” From *The Spirit of Romance* (1910), this is one of Ezra Pound’s earliest calls for a universalizing transhistorical formalism in literary evaluation. It is an injunction that, decades later, both Pound’s *ABC of Reading* and Louis Zukofsky’s much less-discussed *A Test of Poetry* fulfill. These two texts are commonly linked. Triangulating them with Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren’s *Understanding Poetry*, the single most influential poetry textbook of the twentieth century, as I shall occasionally do here, is a bit less common, but provides an additional context for thinking about *A Test of Poetry*: its genesis, its distribution, its reception, its formal features. To invoke *Understanding Poetry* also helps highlight, by contrast, the features of what otherwise sounds like an oxymoron, the avant-garde textbook. This admittedly small subgenre embodies the tension within avant-garde poetics between didacticism and coterie self-preservation and aesthetic autonomy. In so doing, it provides insight into one aspect of the American poetic avant-garde’s commerce with the very academy it typically has derided as its invidious Other.

The publication dates of Pound’s, Zukofsky’s, and Brooks and Warren’s texts are deceptive, and revealing of Zukofsky’s somewhat inauspicious entry into the anthology market. *ABC of Reading* was first published in 1934; *Understanding Poetry* in 1938 and then reissued in 1950 and twice thereafter; and *A Test of Poetry*—apparently the most belated of the three—in 1948. But Zukofsky had actually completed the book years before its publication, and possibly even earlier than the consensus among Zukofsky scholars suggests. That consensus, resting partly on Celia Zukofsky’s bibliography of her husband’s work, has Zukofsky working on the book in the years between 1935 and 1940. But Lorine Niedecker wrote to Jonathan Williams in 1964 that “I know the germ of it was in his mind when I saw him in New York in 1933 and had been before he knew me.” Indeed, it’s not

impossible that Zukofsky started thinking about a corrective text like *Test* as early as 1930, when he first found himself positioned outside institutional parameters for literary evaluation, and—most relevantly for my argument here—outside textbook orthodoxy. As he wrote to Pound in March of that year, “I flunked the N.Y. exam. for license to teach Eng. in the H.S. because on a question dealing with Am. poetry since 1910 I showed my preference for your work as against the ‘major efforts’ of the current handbooks. The examiner noted ‘minor poets treated at too great length, major ones slighted.’”

Despite (or perhaps because of) Zukofsky’s skepticism about “the current handbooks,” *Test* may also have its origins in institutional contexts and in response to institutional imperatives. Zukofsky used “How to Read,” in which Pound theorizes the method of evaluation-by-juxtaposition that became central to *ABC of Reading* and *Test*, as a first-year text at the University of Wisconsin in 1930–31. As Mark Scroggins recounts in his biography of the poet, a few years later, at Columbia Teachers College in summer 1934, Zukofsky worked “on an education project whose goal was to gauge adults’ learning capacities.” This project required that Zukofsky, as experimental subject, respond to three juxtaposed sets of literary examples, some of them poetry. Zukofsky was convinced he could produce more effective tests or examinations himself, and thus may have already been in the process of gathering exhibits when he received the newly published *ABC of Reading*. Although his embryonic textbook is surely somewhat shaped by Pound’s model, it seems likely that, as Scroggins suggests, “Zukofsky inherited [his] ‘blind’ method of presenting material to students from the protocols of the Teacher’s College test series.”

In any case, Zukofsky mentions the book’s completion in two letters. In December 1937 he writes Pound that *Test* was finished, and in a November 1938 letter to William Carlos Williams he implies that he had a version finished by 1934: “I had [*Test*] typed up the summer of 1937 after letting it lie around for 3 yrs. in ms.... I went the rounds of New York publishers with the ms. this last year, but no one wants it. So what?” At the time, Zukofsky had no credibility or track record in the conventional sense: he had published no books (though he had edited *An “Objectivists” Anthology* in 1932), and had one fugitive year of teaching experience. The 1940s brought sporadic shows of interest but, despite Williams’s generous support of the work, no

commitments. In 1943 Williams wrote that “a friend...is interested but doubts that this is the time for it due to the undoubted lack of paper”; in 1945, Zukofsky in his turn wrote that “[Harry] Duncan of Cummington is so impressed by *Test of Poetry*, tho he can’t afford to do it.” Hence the turn to Zukofsky’s own Objectivist Press for publication in 1948.

So much for dates. What about numbers, distribution? *ABC of Reading* was first published in 1934 in an edition of 2,000 by George Routledge in England and in an edition of 1,016 by Yale University Press in the U.S. In 1951, Faber and Faber published another edition of 2,670, and printed 3,500 sets of sheets for New Directions’ American edition. In 1960 New Directions published a paperback edition of 9,897, and in 1961 Faber published a paperback edition of 10,000. Total: 29,803 copies in print by October 1961 with a range of academic, trade, and successful alternative presses. Publication figures for *Understanding Poetry* go back only to 1949, but, as I wrote in *From Outlaw to Classic*, “between 1949 and 1976, total distribution of *Understanding Poetry* in its various forms and editions—cloth and paper, complete and shorter editions—ran to forty printings and 294,700 copies.” The 1950 edition, with which *Test* was most directly in competition, “went through thirteen cloth printings and 73,000 copies in ten years, while the shorter version of this edition went through nine paper printings and 24,700 copies in eight years.”

Its delayed publication, then, meant that *A Test of Poetry* entered a market flooded with textbooks. In a 1954 omnibus review of nine teaching anthologies in *Poetry*, Hugh Kenner writes,

The revolution [in critical and pedagogical method] was touched off, if not exactly masterminded, by Messrs. Brooks and Warren, in 1938. Today the market for “How to Read Poetry” books seems inexhaustible; the revised Brooks and Warren (1950) is now used, according to its publishers, by over 250 institutions; and at least five new publishers have clambered aboard the bandwagon in the past three years. Disseminating poetic taste among college freshmen has become a big business.

In this saturated market, *A Test of Poetry* really didn’t stand a chance—but it is also a question of whether Zukofsky meant it to. (Lorine Niedecker reviewed *Test* as a countervailing force to the din of the

book marketplace more generally: “In this day of adding machines in bookshop windows, or comic greeting cards, the surface tilt, the armed avoidance of quiet, of deep satisfaction, this book is printed.”) I don’t know the specific publication numbers on *Test* but I’m guessing they’re not high, self-published as it was by a poet in no financial position to fund a large run, a marketing campaign, and distribution. Routledge & Kegan Paul published it in England in 1952, using unbound sheets of the American edition, after Zukofsky’s Brooklyn Polytechnic colleague Edward Dahlberg recommended it to Herbert Read. In 1964 Jonathan Williams brought it out in the Jargon edition in which I suspect many of Zukofsky’s readers first encountered it during the ascendancy of the New American Poetry. In 1980 it was reissued in both paperback and hardcover and distributed by Norton as a “C.Z. Publication,” its widest circulation yet. The year 2000 brought the Wesleyan University Press edition. When Lorine Niedecker writes in 1949 that “Univ. of Wis. buys Test! WHOOPEE!” it’s unclear whether she is referring to a library or a class purchase. We do know that Zukofsky used it as a classroom text himself: he invited Williams to speak to a class in which he was using the text, and Hugh Seidman encountered it in Zukofsky’s poetry seminar at Brooklyn Poly in the late 1950s—a class for which, as Seidman recalled, “gather[ing] the necessary 12 students” was “a next to impossible feat.”

But influence and importance have never been solely a matter of numbers and visibility, as Zukofsky had to tell himself with a combination of phlegmatic acceptance and disgruntlement throughout much of his career. He did not aspire to immediate pedagogical reform in the way that Brooks and Warren and Pound did, even though his goal, like theirs, was “[t]o suggest standards,” “comparative standards to quicken [readers’] judgments.” “A means for judging the values of poetic writing is established by the examples themselves,” he writes in the introduction to *Test*, the passive voice marking a quintessential high modernist moment of impersonality. But his remarks on teaching are limited to this: “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. Poetry, as other object matter, is after all for interested people.” Here Zukofsky seems to imagine his book in, and perhaps in tension with, the highly utilitarian context of Brooklyn Poly, where he started teaching in 1947, and where as one practical

effect, *Test* helped his promotion from instructor to assistant professor in 1949. This characteristically terse prefatory statement is about as close as Zukofsky ever gets to something like Brooks and Warren's opening twelve-page "Letter to the Teacher," and yet in fact it resonates oddly with their position in its apparent Arnoldian traditionalism, its appeal to the disinterested, unpragmatic intelligence.

*Test* is more commonly compared not with *Understanding Poetry*, however, but with Pound's *ABC of Reading*. Here we might as well ask the uncomfortable question head on: to what extent is *A Test of Poetry* an exercise in Oedipal derivativeness, an *ABC of Reading*-lite? It *does* remain hard to shake the impression of a certain secondariness about *A Test of Poetry*, independent of its conception date. The title and three-part structure may derive from a sequence of chapter sections in *ABC*: "Tests and Composition Exercises," "Second Set," and "Further Tests" (though Pound's tests are mainly in-class writing and editing exercises). *Test* begins, like *The Cantos*, with book eleven of the *Odyssey*, and had Pound not refused permission by default—he never responded to Zukofsky's request to use over three hundred lines of his work—he would have been the most broadly represented author in the book. Throughout *Test*, we encounter recast Poundian bon mots: "As poetry, only objectified emotion endures." The emphasis on the singular, the particular, the definite; the inveighing against generalization and abstraction; the scientistic rhetoric; the preoccupation with aesthetic judgment; judgment based on fragments of a text rather than the organic whole beloved of their New Critical contemporaries; central criteria such as speech, condensation, singularity, music (even down to the shared comment that "the fitting of words to musical composition seems to have reached its maximum development in English poetry as early as the 14th century"); poetry as a form of information; parataxis as a pedagogical method—these are all significant similarities. Equally striking are the similarities in the often quirky examples: Gavin Douglas, Arthur Golding's translation of the *Metamorphoses*, a Mark Alexander Boyd sonnet, Rochester's "A Letter from Artemisia," Walter Savage Landor's "Epithalamium," and perhaps less idiosyncratically, selections from Chaucer, *Hudibras*, the *Dunciad*, and *Sordello*. (I should add parenthetically, however, that there are more overlapping selections between *A Test of Poetry* and *Understanding Poetry*—twelve—than between *Test* and *ABC of*

*Reading*—eight.) Pound poses the following question to his student reader: “Do the following poems: The early Alisoun, Walsingham, Wyatt’s ‘They flee from me,’ Peele’s ‘Batsabe sings,’ Henry VIII’s ‘Pastime and good company,’ contain any element not represented in the present set of ‘exhibits[?]’” Zukofsky apparently decided they did, because he uses four of these five, along with a different Henry VIII poem, in *A Test of Poetry*.

When Pound received a copy of *A Test of Poetry* in 1954, he sniffed, “Looks like he is following *ABC*.” But along with the similarities, the differences are substantial. Pound pursues a canonizing program of inclusion and exclusion, and is far more concerned to identify inventors, masters, and so forth. (Zukofsky uses over twenty anonymous texts and passages, including three of his own; Pound uses one.) Hence all the reading lists; hence the praise of Pope as Pound’s canonizing precursor: “[Pope’s] attacks coincided with expressions of respect to the better authors (as Dryden and Swift for example) whom he attempts to weed out from writers who were nuisances in his day”; “Pope [for whom we can read “Pound”] should be given credit for his effort at drainage.” Pound’s canonical distinctions are part of his attempt to reform pedagogy, which he relates using the metaphors of cultural light, health, and disease that make up the familiar Poundian shorthand. Zukofsky shares none of these explicit ambitions in his more reticent *Test*. From the perspective of one who, as a young poet, learned from both *ABC* and *Test*, Robert Creeley contrasts the two works rhetorically: “Pound was intent on telling the reader what he, Pound, thought the reader should know, providing little room for other reflection. Reading, one simply followed the brilliant leader. But Zukofsky’s work was differently addressed, even though he stated his observations just as firmly.” As one manifestation of this different address, Zukofsky, unlike Pound, literally provides space for response. Each passage in *Test* has, next to its numerical heading, an underscored space designed for readerly comment: “This space may be used by the reader who enjoys marking up his copy for evaluating the compared examples...in some such way as *great, good, fair, poor*.” While Pound hopes that “students...will read the EXHIBITS, and not look at my footnotes until they have at least tried to find out WHAT THE EXHIBIT IS,” his insistent juxtaposition of text and commentary renders that hope functionally impossible. When Zukofsky presents two of

the three sections of *Test* without comment, his organization invites a greater degree of reader autonomy, creating at least some chance of fulfilling his perhaps quixotic preference that a reader only consult the final Chronological Chart “casually *after* reading all 3 parts.”

But I think it more productive to consider *A Test of Poetry* not as ABC-lite but as in dialogue with its immediate predecessor, part of a tradition of avant-garde responses to mainstream critical practices and pedagogical institutions. In terms of its genealogy, what I am calling the avant-garde textbook belongs in a line of poet-authored polemical, experimental work written against the grain of institutional criticism that, in the twentieth century, would include D.H. Lawrence’s *Studies in Classic American Literature*, William Carlos Williams’s *In the American Grain*, much of Pound’s prose, Charles Olson’s *Call Me Ishmael*, Robert Duncan’s *The H.D. Book*, and Susan Howe’s *My Emily Dickinson* and *The Birth-Mark*. But as a particular subgenre of the poet-critic’s work, the avant-garde textbook differs in its generic features from this body of writing, and dramatizes an ongoing tension within avant-garde poetics: it wants both to stand as a self-contained statement of poetics and to disseminate those values to a larger audience without compromise. In *ABC* and *Test*, Pound and Zukofsky produce books that are fundamentally hostile or indifferent to the very institutional contexts that they aspire to enter or affect. Pound comments on pedagogical institutions by lambasting them; Zukofsky ignores them, even within that most institutionalized and market-oriented of forms, the textbook. Thus the avant-garde textbook resists its own status *as* textbook, and indeed evidence suggests that Zukofsky sought to make *Test* less textbook-like as he worked on it. In 1938, for example, he sent Williams, in addition to what became the “Comment” and “Note” to his use of “The Red Wheelbarrow,” a Brooks-and-Warren-style “Question” to the student that he excised from the final version of *Test*. As John Nichols has noted, mainstream teaching anthologies of the period were, by contrast, increasing the amount of editorial apparatus that they contained to the point of its outweighing the poems.

In Zukofsky’s hands, the avant-garde textbook is a carefully shaped, formally symmetrical object: an interested publisher would have to take it “without any revision,” he writes to Williams, because “the volume has a plan I can’t break into without having to re-write it all.” In turn the dual nature of *Test*—part annotated teaching



anthology, part art object—suggests not just ambivalence in Zukofsky's intentions (did he or did he not in fact intend *Test* to be used as a textbook?) but the self-division at the heart of the genre, something equally reflected in his reluctance to make overt pedagogical claims within a pedagogical genre. Both Pound's and Zukofsky's texts are constructivist anthologies—as Williams described *Test*, “a sort of heavenly collage.” To tweak Zukofsky, we might say that the avant-garde textbook, as much as the poem, “convinces not by argument but by the *form* it creates to carry its content,” and Rachel Blau DuPlessis has shown how Zukofsky reshapes in *Test* his abandoned and much more conventionally organized *Workers Anthology* while preserving the bulk of its contents. Yet how rare it is even for the most experimental of poets to reimagine the form of the anthology or textbook. Jerome Rothenberg has done so in our own time, and Zukofsky did so in his. Remember that in *ABC of Reading*, Pound thought that “the ideal way to present [his exhibits] would be to give the quotations WITHOUT any comment whatever. I am afraid that would be too revolutionary.” For two-thirds of *Test*, Zukofsky takes that revolutionary risk, going much further than Pound in withholding commentary in an attempt to elicit independent judgment.

In its varying degrees of resistance to commentary, the avant-garde textbook is cryptic in ways that the conventional textbook—which must write everything on the presumed tabula rasa of the student mind—can never be. *A Test of Poetry* and *ABC of Reading* both work metonymically, isolating passages, lines, even phrases, as pinnacles of poetic achievement. In this sense, they are gatherings of citations as much as of poems. Zukofsky's distance from the orthodox teaching anthology is perhaps most sharply evident in his use of Keats. In *Understanding Poetry*, Brooks and Warren print the whole of “To Autumn” and then ask teacher and class to “discuss this poem in regard to questions of metrical variation, onomatopoeia, quantity, and hovering accent as related to the intention of the poem.” Zukofsky's use of “To Autumn” extends this far: “Hedge-crickets sing.” Even more cryptically, we're asked to read this phrase as an example of recurrence, and it might take another poet's essay, Robert Grenier's “‘Hedge-crickets sing,’” to unpack the claim: “s s value in ‘Hedge-cricket)s s(ing;’ letter-to-letter & the leap between words not ‘dashed’ together.” Unlike the typical teaching anthology, then, *A Test of Poetry*

often requires interpretation as much as it provides it.

If we shift contexts and think of it as part of Zukofsky's ongoing practice of a citational poetics, *A Test of Poetry* occupies an intriguing space on the generic continuum from poetry to poetics to criticism. "A"-8, for instance, on which Zukofsky was working at the same time as *Test*, is dotted with snippets from *Test* and from the abandoned *Workers Anthology*. "A"-12, written in 1950–51, includes a sonnet that "Could have gone into *A Test of Poetry*— / Written when Shakespeare was twenty or so / By one John Soowthern or Soothern— / A poor, I think, text / A bit arranged by me." The poem in question follows. A few pages later we get "Item for *A Test of Poetry*, / Elizabeth's *Princess of Espinoy* // Sonnet." The point, here, is that Elizabeth's sonnet becomes precisely *not* an "item" for *Test* (which does not include it) but for "A", just as Soothern's poem "could have gone into" *Test* but instead went into "A". Zukofsky's syntax and diction, that of the scholarly note, draw attention to the continuity, rather than to the generic distinctions, between the two projects, showing his poetics of appropriation at work. Moments like these suggest a deep continuity between *A Test of Poetry* and "A", between the statement of poetics and the poetry—the same text belongs equally in either one as part of its architecture, and the lines introducing the Soothern poem would fit equally well as a clarifying note in *Test*. By my count, fourteen passages cited or mentioned in *Test* make their way into "A" (and thirteen into *Bottom: On Shakespeare*). *A Test of Poetry* is of a piece with the chronologically ordered citations by, to, and about Williams that make up much of "A"-17, citations that include Zukofsky's comments from *Test* on "The Red Wheelbarrow" and that link Zukofsky and Williams in a kind of minianthology. Resituated, components of "A" can be read under the sign of criticism or the teaching anthology—as Peter Quartermain puts it, "A' is, amongst other things, a textbook of poetry"—and components of *A Test of Poetry* can be read under the sign of poetry.

This principle of continuity across genres is central to Zukofsky's practice. Creeley was fond of citing the idea that "Zukofsky says, one writes one poem all one's life"; as Zukofsky himself put it in "A", "Each writer writes / one long work whose beat he cannot / entirely be aware of." Thus, for instance, his critical-philosophical treatise *Bottom: On Shakespeare* is simultaneously—in the terms of a 1961 note by Zukofsky—"a long poem," "a poet's autobiography," and "a continuation of my

work on prosody in my other writings,” and *Test* is a statement of Objectivist poetics. (Certain readers—Bob Perelman, Cid Corman—have noted some of the discrepancies between the principles espoused in *Test* and aspects of Zukofsky’s own practice.) In a late-career interview with L.S. Dembo, Zukofsky defines the Objectivist poet as “a craftsman who puts words together into an object,” and goes on to propose *A Test of Poetry* as one enactment of that definition:

I tried in *A Test of Poetry* to show what I meant by giving examples of different poets writing...on the same subject. People are free to construct whatever table they want, but if it’s going to be art you had better have some standards. I at least want a table I can write on and put to whatever use a table usually has.

“You had better have some standards”: Zukofsky’s avant-garde textbook suggested those standards in an ostensibly academic format that nevertheless had little truck with academic convention. At least one of the few early reviewers of *Test*, though writing in an academic context, still praised the work for its counter-academic qualities: “The measure between what the academy can do for devising tests for poetry and what a sophisticated, independent and informed taste can do when drawing upon the same historical riches is aptly demonstrated in Mr. Zukofsky’s excellent little *A Test of Poetry*.” Meanwhile, in a fine irony, the manuscript of *A Test of Poetry* exists at the Harry Ransom Center in Austin in a quintessentially institutional form—fourteen blue exam books. For this virtually *sui generis* book, with its stringent architecture, its hedged, often gnomic, pedagogy, and its origins in the formulation of educational tests, one could hardly imagine a more appropriate material form of archival afterlife.

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