

Louis Zukofsky: Selected Poems, by Charles Bernstein

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Louis Zukofsky: Selected Poems, by Charles Bernstein:

Selection, Absorption, Projection.

Volumes of *Selected Poems* are versatile objects that put into question the very nature of authorship. They come in a variety of forms and respond to a whole range of preoccupations. To mention but a few major trends, one thus has first to make a distinction between selections that are of the concerned poet's own making and selections that arise through external work, often a-posteriori or posthumously once this poet's corpus has come to completion and can be considered as a more or less coherent body. Spanning the years and circumstances of a career in poetry writing, these latter selections, which are the focus of this study, respond to a number of demands: notably those of publishers, wanting to provide usable one-volume formats for the greater public, and those of teachers, whose aim is to expose the poetry to the reactions and appreciation of younger readers. A great part of the context for these selections lies in a strong pedagogical preoccupation based on the accessibility of the work and its legibility. The choice of the editors for these volumes is usually made among critics and/or academics since they are considered more able than others to meet the rules of the genre: providing a selection of texts that will be emblematic of the entire work, that will trigger the desire to read more of the same, and presumably that will integrate the poet's work into the canon of poetry.

However there are also cases in which a volume of *Selected Poems* arises from apparently similar motives, but in fact comes to embody something else simply because the

editor is not just a scholar but also happens to be a poet himself, with his own specific agenda and his own particular expectations in terms of the poetics that the selection should help crystallize. Such might be the case with the small selection of poems by Louis Zukofsky made by Charles Bernstein and published as part of the “American Poets Project” for the Library of America in 2006. Apart from the selection of sixteen poems made by Zukofsky’s wife Celia and published in 1962 by Wild Hawthorn Press in Edinburgh, an artist’s book and a collector’s item, unpagged and with lithographs, there are no other selected poems for Louis Zukofsky than Charles Bernstein’s. Most publications are either volumes of poetry published by the poet before his death in 1978 or complete volumes designed for a public of critics and scholars and coming from the University Press of New Hampshire or from Wesleyan University Press, all of which part of a vast project centered around the centennial of Zukofsky’s birth in 2004. So a great deal of the impulse to reconsider this poet’s work is celebratory, and many publications in the wake of the centennial are parts of a more general homage. Bringing Zukofsky into the Library of America’s series of Selected Poems, which includes volumes of poems by Emma Lazarus, Muriel Ruckeyser, Kenneth Koch, William Carlos Williams, Yvor Winters edited respectively by John Hollander, Adrienne Rich, Ron Padgett, Robert Pinsky, Thom Gunn, can be construed as belonging to the same trend.

Nevertheless, this homage does not come from all parts indistinctly and mostly not from the heart of academe. It is striking to see how it is mostly carried out by poets belonging to the more experimental fringes of contemporary American poetry, followed in this by a relatively small number of critics and scholars. Some of this is to be ascribed to the lack of visibility of Zukofsky’s work: his poems are published by a major publisher, Norton, no earlier than 1968, whereas the heydays of his poetic activity are in the 1930s when he gathers the Objectivist anthology, thus bringing together poets such as Carl Rakosi, Charles Reznikoff

or William Carlos Williams, and starts work on his long poem “A,” first in imitation then as a response to the unfolding of Ezra Pound’s *Cantos*. And whereas his friend George Oppen returns to poetry in the 1960s to win the 1969 Pulitzer Prize for his book *Of Being Numerous*, Louis Zukofsky remains mostly in obscurity, surrounded by poets who visit him, working on his own poetry, influential but not widely published. One of the reasons for this situation is, rather obviously, the notorious difficulty of Zukofsky’s work and the idiosyncrasies of his poetic practice. Amazing examples of his disquieting attention to the formal qualities of the poem and the structural intricacies of sound and vocabulary can be found in Abigail Lang’s study of the first half of “A-9” or, more recently, in Xavier Kalck’s complex readings of some of the shorter poetry in his doctoral dissertation on the Objectivists’ “experience of language.”

Now this linguistic focus in Zukofsky’s poetry meets the experiments and theoretical reflections of a number of contemporary poets who formed a group around Charles Bernstein and his journal *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* in the 1980s, and who have recently started collective work again, after years of looser collaboration, through the series of “collective autobiographies” entitled the *Grand Piano*. The “Grand Piano” is the name of a bar, but is it fully coincidental that this name should bring back to the fore a musical paradigm which is central to a number of poetics, and most notably Zukofsky’s¹? whose most famous assertion remains about the integral of poetry whose “upper limit” is music? If one quickly scans the succession of Charles Bernstein’s work, there are recurrent contact points between his poetics and the poetics practiced by Louis Zukofsky. To take but two examples at this stage:

—the definition of the “new sentence” and the issues of grammar and the integration of discourse. In the makings of the Language Poets’ poetics, the interest in the functioning of language is acute. It first expresses itself through a grammatical approach to discourse, and an

ideological reflection on the coercive thinking at work in the very uses of syntactic conventions. By disrupting the very structure of the sentence and preventing what they call grammatical “integration,” i.e. the intellectual move from the word as unit up to the sentence, and further up to the coherence of a given text, the poets bring out the processes involved in what Charles Bernstein calls “absorption.” In his poem “The Artifice of Absorption” (Bernstein 1992, 9-89) he thus underlines the ways the reader is surreptitiously made to adhere to a given type of discourse through the illusion of transparency and the smooth, direct conveyance of meaning. Through strategies straining the rules of syntax and unbalancing the reader in his or her attempts to construct univocal meaning for the text, “absorption” is at least hindered and the mechanisms of its workings can be questioned. In many of his poems, especially the political ones, but not just, Zukofsky resorts to similar methods to destabilize reading and create gaps or fractures allowing for the proliferation of multiple meanings.

—Another example lies in the use of the indefinite article Charles Bernstein makes to construct the pun in the title of his 1992 book of essays “APOETICS.” Bob Perelman provides a close analysis of the way typography, and the use of equal spacing between all the letters as well as of capitalization, allow for the double reading of the title:

A small typographical feature can serve as an initial symptom. On the front and back covers, the half-title and title pages, and in the paragraph giving the Library of Congress publication data, the book's title is *A Poetics*. But on one page before the text begins, *ap o e t i c s* is printed in evenly spaced lowercase bold letters. The doppelgänger embodies a key property of the book: *ap o e t i c s* with its nonhierarchical typography (no capital letters, no word boundaries) is a small example of the radically democratic poetry Bernstein is arguing for, apoetry not governable by a normative poetics, a poetry that would itself constitute an apoetics (Perelman 1996, 80).

“A Poetics,” in two words, announces the assertive statement of poetic criteria; but “apoetics,” in one word, opens up the possibility of denying any stable or final assertion of poetics, and seems to favor the absence of poetic options as well as the exercise of provisional

poetic practices, unharnessed by poetic theory. The focus is on the instability of the article “a,” precisely the article which is at the core of Zukofsky’s own poetic obsessions, and is the title of his long poem “A.” Of course, generous excerpts of “A” appear in the *Selected Poems*.

So the volume of Zukofsky’s *Selected Poems* edited by Charles Bernstein also comes as concrete evidence of the connections between two generations of poets, and this is already apparent on the cover. The back cover states the importance of Zukofsky as a “modern master,” thus stressing the fact that the collection might not simply be emblematic of the man’s poetry but also gather poems deemed most influential among his work.

With an ear tuned to the most delicate musical effects, an eye for exact and heterogeneous details, and a mind bent on experiment, Louis Zukofsky was preeminent among the radical Objectivist poets of the 1930s. This is the first collection to draw on the full range of Zukofsky’s poetry—containing short lyrics, versions of Catullus, and generous selections from “A”, his 24-part “poem of a life”—and provides a superb introduction to a modern master. (Bernstein 2006, back cover)

The design of the dust-jacket is in itself interesting because the square which contains the full title of the book partially hides two letters. At first glance, they are an “L” and a “Z,” the initials of Louis Zukofsky, which does not seem at all remarkable. However the horizontal bottom bar of the “L” has a strange round shape that could easily turn the capital L into a small “b.” In this case, the volume would be placed under the sign of two poets instead of one, claiming authorship both for Zukofsky and Bernstein: lowercase “b” and capital “Z.”

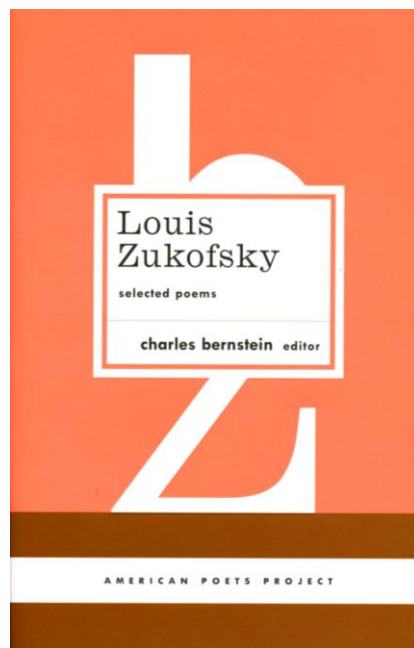


Fig. 1: Front cover of Bernstein 2006

This hypothesis is confirmed by the unveiling of the design inside the dust jacket—and the use of the same process in other volumes of the American Poets Project series. And in fact it is this interaction which dominates the choice of poems throughout the volume, shaped by a constant preoccupation with sound and sound effects in the poem. These are of course central to Zukofsky's poetics, with his interest not only in the sound of words but also in the compositional possibilities offered by music.

Games on phonetics are particularly obvious in the Catullus translations, which are sampled in the *Selected Poems* although their status as full-blown poems could be discussed. The concept behind the Catullus translations is both astonishing and a perfect challenge. The translation must find an elusive balance between the grammars and sounds of two languages, Latin and English, since the English version is supposed to produce the same sounds as (or sounds very similar to) the Latin, while making sense in English and approaching the meaning of the original text. Here is not really the place to closely examine the results and effects of such an enterprise, but let it be said that the comparison between the two versions

experimental attempts at rendering the Latin sounds while preserving meaningfulness in English:

May we live, my Lesbia, love while we may,
and as for the asseverating seniors
estimate them as one naught we won't assess. (Bernstein 2006, 156)

Mool 'tis homos,' Naso 'n' queer take 'im mool 'tis ho
most he
descended: Naso, mool 'tis—is it pathetic cuss. (Bernstein 2006, 160)

Now this pattern, observed locally in the selection from Catullus, is at work at large throughout the selection. Charles Bernstein is intent on showing the increasing drift of Zukofsky's poetry towards the straining of grammar, the objectifying of semantics, and a more general reluctance to exploit the delusive transparencies of language. Both the opening of the selection, with a 1922 poem which the introduction defines as “prescient” (Bernstein 2006, xv), and its closing, with one last poem excerpted from the *Complete Short Poetry*, entitled “Gamut” (1978), confirm this editorial decision:

Vast, tremulous;
Grave on grave of water-grave;

Past.

Futurity no more than duration
Of wave's rise, fall, rebound
Against the shingles, in ever repeated mutation
Of emptied returning sound. (Bernstein 2006, 1)

Much ado about trees lichen
hugs alga and fungus live
off each other hoe does
dear owe dear earth terrace
money sunday coffee poorjoe snow (Bernstein 2006, 165)

“I Sent Thee Late” evidences the enjoyment in the musicality of repetition and variation as well as a desire to play on the grammatical functions of words so as to inflect the orientation of a sentence. Also it opens up through double entendre onto metapoetic considerations. Similarly although more indirectly, “Gamut” thematizes these key aspects of Zukofsky’s poetry—and of the Language Poets’ work, particularly Charles Bernstein’s—through their radical enforcement rather than implicit metapoetic reference. The poem is without punctuation and though syntactic units can be parsed, they shift as the poem moves on, and recompose in such ways that an overall coherence proves impossible while local coherencies emerge on a temporary basis. It is precisely this evolution which allows Charles Bernstein to position himself in a direct filiation from Zukofsky.

But this evolution is also an effect of perspective—one is tempted to say a consequence of Bernstein’s use of the double meaning of the word “objective” which is at the roots of Zukofsky’s Objectivist manifesto: an objective being at the same time a lens through which the world can be apprehended anew and an aim towards which this operation must be directed:

An Objective: (Optics)—The lens bringing the rays from an object to a focus. That which is aimed at. (Use extended to poetry)—Desire for what is objectively perfect, inextricably the direction of historic and contemporary particulars. (Zukofsky 2000, 12)

This becomes more obvious still when one considers the poem “Mantis” which Bernstein willfully leaves out of the selection. This is how he justifies this omission:

At the other side of the spectrum from “The” and “Songs of Degrees” is “Mantis,” a much-cited poem from 1934, not included in this selection. The elaborate conceit of the piece is a praying mantis “lost in the subway”—“fact,” Zukofsky notes, not “symbol,” of the “oppression” and “helplessness” of the poor. In his most explicitly proletarian mode, the author produce the single work of his that is most conducive to New Critical close reading. Indeed, “Mantis” displays how Zukofsky is able to use the closed-form sestina as a means for social reflection. (Bernstein 2006, xx)

Literally, “Mantis” is here placed within the context of a poetics very different from any that would focus on grammar (“The”) or musicality (“Songs of Degrees”) since it resorts to “conceit,” and fixed form to elaborate on the social awareness of a politically committed poet. Here Zukofsky falls back, at least in Bernstein’s view, on conventionality both from a thematic and from a formal viewpoint. “Mantis” does not belong to the body of poems that refrain from empathetic appeal and the “absorption” of the reader to privilege a process of defamiliarization leading to a more acute awareness of language at work. The estrangements is thematic and empathy (absorption) is called for. Even though it does belong, in a major way, to Louis Zukofsky’s poetic achievement, one has to realize that “Mantis” does not quite fit in with the portrait of Zukofsky as a Language poet which Bernstein is discreetly aiming at.

A few words of conclusion would thus lead to us to reconsider the three terms of my title—“selection,” “absorption,” “projection”—to see how they trace the process presiding over Charles Bernstein’s project in putting together a volume of selected poems for Louis Zukofsky. “Selection” is to be understood in the strongest sense of the term, in its etymological dimension of a choice made not only according to reason but also according to taste and personal preference. In this case, Bernstein’s choice goes towards the poems that conform to his vision of Zukofsky as a master for the Language Poets, focused on the workings of discourse, their constraints and the modes of their thematization. “Absorption,” a key word in the Bernsteinian vocabulary is actually not to be taken in the sense he highlights in “Artifice of Absorption,” whereby this process of surreptitious manipulation of the reader leads to a passive reception and acceptance of the text’s premises. Rather, “absorption” is here to be understood as a process of appropriation through which Zukofsky’s poems become pieces in a poetic jigsaw puzzle whose final form does not so much provide an overall image

of his poetry as it conveys a specific reading of this poetry, and “a poetics” for the volume’s editor rather than the edited author. This is the reason why one might consider the final volume of *Selected Poems* as a “projection” insofar as it follows specific rules that tie one form to its projected other in the same way as mathematicians do geometrical projections. But to understand the rules presiding over this configuration of Louis Zukofsky’s poetry, one has to come to terms with the fact that these rules are also what shapes Charles Bernstein’s poetry. In this case, at least, the fact that the editor of Louis Zukofsky’s *Selected Poems* is Charles Bernstein turns the volume into the actualization of a double agenda: the recovery or rather production of an experimental canon and a powerful demonstration of its current usefulness for the working poet—one might say: a truly Zukofskyan project after all.

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¹ Is it necessary to evoke Louis Zukofsky most famous poetic assertion in *A-12* according to which the integral of poetry (in the mathematical sense) has music as its "upper limit" (Zukofsky 1993, 138)?