

Three Essays by

Lorine Niedecker



The Poetry of Louis Zukofsky

The Poetry of Cid Corman

*A review of Louis Zukofsky's **A Test of Poetry***



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The Poetry of Louis Zukofsky

To record and elate for all time . . . (poems) based on nothing less than the world, the entire humanly known world.

* * *

Good verse is determined by the poet's susceptibilities involving a precise awareness of differences, forms and possibilities of existence — words with their own attractions included. The poet, no less than the scientist, works on the assumption that inert and live things and relations hold enough interest to keep him alive as part of nature.

* * *

Felt deeply, poems like all things have the possibilities of elements whose isotopes are yet to be found. Light has travelled and so looked forward.

Poetry — For My Son When He Can Read

Twenty-five years before he wrote these statements in behalf of poetry, Zukofsky began his long poem "A." It was strange at that moment of time and at that point in space. Many writers and readers, unless travelling at the same speed, have lost contact with "A" and some who wore dark glasses then are now beginning to see.

It is understandable that Lawrence Durrell, living in countries other than the United States and so probably unaware of "A," should be thinking now along the same lines: "Time has become . . . welded in space — no longer the quickly flowing river of the Christian hymns moving from here to there along a marked series of stages. But an always present yet always recurring thing." "A" presents an order of succession but also of interweaving themes uniting with new and related matter, tightening often into such forms as canzones or ballades the tonality of our speech. The poet asked himself early in the poem: "*Can/ The design/ Of the fugue/ Be transferred/ To poetry?*"

Technically, a recurring thing, for all but the apathetic student, is never the same — though the *idea of recurrence* is useful to establish relationships, to reveal kinship. There were journeys through past hells, heavens — flowing rivers still navigable by degrees. Zukofsky's hell is today's and the good he finds is today's. From the incident of a performance of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* at Carnegie Hall the poem moves to make the singing, living machine of our time. Now with some 200 pages of "A" — twelve movements — we see that here is one who has always been coming to where he is and who wants to know what he has to live through to get further. Whether he writes of live or inanimate objects or cities or minds, our usual notion of poem is bound to be upset a little by the constant electronic interaction. "Three or four things occur at the same time making the difference between Aristotelian expansive unities and the concentrated locus which is the mind acting creatively upon the facts." —Z. in his preface to *An Objectivists Anthology*.

"How journeyed?/ Journeyed./ With an impulse to master/ music and related matters."
("A"-8)

My one voice. My other: is
An objective — rays of the object brought to a focus,
An objective — nature as creator — desire
for what is objectively perfect
Inextricably the direction of historic and
contemporary particulars. (“A”-6)

As for Spinoza: “He who creates/ Is a mode of these inertial systems —/ The flower — leaf
around leaf wrapped around the center leaf” (“A”-6)

Journeyed. Overheard on a side street after the performance of the *Passion*.
“The Pennsylvania miners . . . the thing’s/ becoming a mass movement.” (“A”-1)
To Reno — “Divorced from himself.” (“A”-6)
Saluting friends and other poets, and Bach’s *Passion*.

“There are different techniques,
Men write to be read, or spoken,
Or declaimed, or rhapsodized,
And quite differently to be sung”;
“I heard him agonizing,
I saw him *inside*”;
“Everything which
We really are and never quite live.”
Far into (about three) in the morning,
The trainmen wide awake, calling
Station on station, under earth, (“A”-1)

Boy and girl — “Breath fast as in love’s lying close,/ Crouched high — O my God, into the
flower!” (“A”-2) And “On that Sunday, in the wind, in the night,/ in the grasses,/ Were prostrated
a thousand asses —/ Lads’, and lasses’,” (“A”-6) . . . “Our aged heads are our homes/ We had a
Speech, our children have/ evolved a jargon./ Even the Death has gone out of us — we are void.”
 (“A”-4)

But I tell you this man had vistas: —
Ties, handkerchiefs to match,
Mufflers, dress shirts, golf holes,
Chocolate eclaires, automobiles and entrées. (“A”-6)

And of horses: “In another world/ We will not motor.” (“A”-3) We may not, say the
wooden sawhorses of “A”-7, the kicking horse rhythm and the flying manes of words — horseplay
if it were not so serious. The poet resolves his criticism of poetry into the movement of the poem.
“Street closed.” The seven diggers work on a street with eyes closed, ears closed. “From me to
them no singing gut” since everything says, including the poet “We want a meal, different tech-
niques.” Names and ideas from previous movements of “A” are brought in again: Ricky,
liveforever, Shimaunu-San, clavicembalo. The theme of “A”-7 is one that not everyone writing
knows, even yet, this far past the depression: that an intellectual, an artist, must sit on a stoop by
himself when everybody else has “strayed,” if they were there, “on a manhole.”

The First Half of "A"-9, published in 1940, works economic value and some concepts of modern physics into the canzone form. Here again, Zukofsky is concerned with making a poem. "A"'s ethics and politics are as old as Aristotle from whom Marx took, or as old as Xenophanes (who took from the Old Testament?) or *The Book of the Dead*: a distinction between use and unnatural use. The prose statement on the form tells us of the mathematical analogue used in translating the music of Cavalcanti's *Donna Mi Prega* into English. "The ratio of the accelerations of two sounds (r;n) has been made equal to the ratio of the accelerations of the coordinates (x,y) of a particle moving in a circular path with uniform angular velocity." As a poet's labor of today the difficulties of transliterating internal and end rhyme, odd assonance and consonance, eleven syllables and four main stresses to a line, all of another century, were not enough. "Applied mathematics employs a quantity called 'Action' defined as the product of energy and time. Perhaps things are such quanta of 'Action' when they are defined as time congealed labor." Zukofsky turned labor as abstraction "into the labor present in the words of the song itself" (*Restatement*, "A"-9). The second half of "A"-9 is another canzone, the rhyme almost identical with that of the first — the 13th century prosody and love — recapitulated in its 20th century definition as calculus of thought, but thought that still has a shape: and so it balances the economics and physics of the first half. Readers will not notice the calculus, only the sound, the energy, and that is the art of it. A great deal of modern art and literature is tissue wrapping paper, not stuff that is tough. Zukofsky's stuff is tough. The first two strophes and coda of the first half are:

An impulse to action sings of a semblance
 Of things related as equated values,
 The measure all use is time congealed labor
 In which abstraction things keep no resemblance
 To goods created; integrated all hues
 Hide their natural use to one or one's neighbor.
 So that were the things they could say: Light is
 Like night is like us when we meet our mentors
 Use hardly enters into their exchanges,
 Bought to be sold things, our value arranges;
 We flee people who made us as a right is
 Whose sight is quick to choose us as frequenters,
 But see our centers do not show the changes
 Of human labor our value estranges.

Values in series taking on as real
 We affect ready gold a steady token
 Flows in unbroken circuit and induces
 Our being, wearies of us as ideal
 Equals that heady crises eddy. Broken
 Mentors, unspoken wealth labor produces,
 Now loom as causes disposing our loci,
 The foci of production: things reflected
 As wills subjected; formed in the division
 Of labor, labor takes on our imprecision —
 Bought, induced by gold at no gain, tho close eye

And gross sigh fixed upon gain have effected
Value erected on labor, prevision
Of surplus value, disparate decision.

* * *

We are things, say like a quantum of action
Defined product of energy and time, now
In these words which rhyme now how song's exaction
Forces abstraction to turn from equated
Values to labor we have approximated.

Of the second half:

An eye to action sees love bear the semblance
Of things, related is equated, — values
The measure all use who conceive love, labor
Men see, abstraction they feel, the resemblance
(Part, self-created, integrated) all hues
Show to natural use, like Benedict's neighbor
Crying his hall's flown into the bird: Light is
The night isolated by stars (poled mentors)
Blossom eyelet enters peeling with such changes
As sweet alyssum, that not-madness, (ranges
In itself, there tho acting without right) is —
Whose sight is rays, "I shall go; the frequenters
That search our centers, love; Elysium exchanges
No desires; its thought loves what hope estranges."
Such need may see reason, the perfect real —
A body ready as love's steady token
Fed thought unbroken as pleasure induces —
True to thought wearies never its ideal
That loves love, head, every eddy. Broken
Plea, best unspoken, a lip's change produces
Suffers to confuse this thought and its loci,
The foci of things timelessly reflected —
Substance subjected to no human prevision,
Free as exists it loves: worms dig; imprecision
Of indignation cannot make the rose high
Or close sigh, therein blessedness effected
Thru power has directed love to envision
Where body is it bears a like decision.

* * *

Love speaks: “in wracked cities there is less action,
Sweet alyssum sometimes is not of time; now
Weep, love’s heir, rhyme now how song’s exaction
Is your distraction — related is equated,
How else is love’s distance approximated.”

Zukofsky’s greatest gift lies in transmuting events into poetry. The thing as it happens. The how of it happening becomes the poem’s form. “A”-10’s “Paris/ Of your beautiful phrases/ Is fallen/ The wire service halted/ *Go ahead Paris*.” In this movement Zukofsky meets a particular kind of scourge with a power of his own:

The Rhino is a lovely beast
He has two horns or one at least
And neither horn is just a horn
Provoking a dictator’s scorn
His surest backside venting scorn
He sits upon the Rhino’s horn
And incorporate spumes up a yeast
The Rhino such a lovely beast

Empaled beneath the Rhino’s knee
People foul in its wet majesty
It feels them with a heavy paw
The spittle dribbles from its jaw
He mires their bleeding overalls
The loveliest of animals

He has also handled the A-bomb tests which demonstrators on the spot tell us are “beautiful, relax and enjoy em . . . the greatest show on earth.”

Journeyed. Home. “A”-11, probably the high mark of all “A” so far in construction, subject matter and emotion of intellect, starts with the prelude:

River that must turn full after I stop dying
Song, my song, raise grief to music
Light as my loves’ thought, the few sick
So sick of wrangling: thus weeping,
Sounds of light, stay in her keeping
And my son’s face — this much for honor.

The whole poem — Bach’s *Passion* continues in the last stanza:

His voice in me, the river’s turn that finds the
Grace in you, four notes first too full for talk, leaf
Lighting stem, stems bound to the branch that binds the
Tree, and then as from the same root we talk, leaf
After leaf of your mind’s music, page, walk leaf
Over leaf of his thought, sounding

His happiness: song sounding
The grace that comes from knowing
Things, her love our own showing
Her love in all her honor.'

The Twelfth Movement — the longest — stops at the half-way mark. He tells us somewhere along toward the end of it:

I've finished 12 "books"
So to speak,
Of 24 —
A kind of childlike
Play this division
Into 24,

Here we have Aristotle, Spinoza, Celia, Paul — grandfather and grandson, Ovid, Shakespeare. Zukofsky has been intrigued for some time by an Ovid-Shakespeare-Spinoza continuum. According to his essay *Bottom* (New Directions 14) which is the beginning of a book on Shakespeare, both the Bard and Spinoza looked up to Ovid, and thirty-five years after the publication of the First Folio Spinoza had abstracted Shakespeare's drama. "A"-12 says this too, and much else — notably Lucretius as the creator of Hotspur might have read him, a chart of learning to be taken lightly (sic), Paracelsus (without Browning's fuss), a graph of Plato and an integration of actual present-day letters. Editors have spoken of its length — 85 pages — as though we live by page numbers. "— Look, Paul, where/ The sawhorses of "A"-7/ have brought me."

Out of deep need
Four trombones and the organ in the nave
A torch surged —
Timed the theme Bach's name,
Dark, larch and ridge, night:
From my body to other bodies
Angel and bastards interchangeably
Who had better sing and tell stories
Before all will be abstracted.
So goes: first, *shape*
The creation —
A mist from the earth,
The whole face of the ground;
Then *rhythm*—
And breathed breath of life;
Then *style*—
That from the eye its function takes —
"Taste" we say – a living soul.

I'm an artist," said six-year-old Paul. "I'll do what I want/ The violin in the morning,/ a mister of arts,/ a red fire in a blue fog at night/ in the afternoon paint."

At a certain age the child cries about
His right to handle a gadget
Or a system for flushing one's water.
As I said one night impatiently to Paul
Who had waked me, and forgetting
I hurried, lèse majesté, to flush
— Crying about flushed p?

Paracelsus:

Again, again
Despised
By the pack that is large,
Whose understanding and art are small—
My father, who's never forsaken me
Died and I buried him.

And the blessed:

Hate
When loved
Becomes
Love,
But it's true
No one
Wants
To be sick
To get well.
The way
Things are,
Quiet
Is happier
Than most words.

As the world continues, the poem is whirled into liveforever.

Aside from the fact that Zukofsky's short poems are intensely individual and their energy sings in a new way, they move in a circular path "so that we may think in our time." Indeed they seem to move in all directions at once — each of the smallest and the most quiet a field of magnetic force. The subject matter of *55 Poems* (1941) is various — the young man excited by what he sees around him. One day as he was riding the subway to work an insect which he found to be the preying mantis perched on him, opening its mouth. The thing worked itself into the poem "Mantis" with a poem interpreting "Mantis." The "Interpretation" asks what form should "Mantis" take?

That this thought's torsion
Is really a sestina
Carrying subconsciously
Many intellectual and sensual properties of the forgetting
and remembering Head
One human's intuitive Head

Dante's rubric
Incipit
Surrealiste
Re-collection

A twisted shoe by a pen, an insect, lost,
"To the short day and the great sweep of shadow."

"Wicker-work —/ As a force, one would lie to one's feelings not to use it."

One feels in fact inevitably
About the coincidence of the mantis lost in the subway,
About the growing oppression of the poor —
Which is the situation most pertinent to us —,
With the fact of the sestina:
Which together fatally crop up again
To twist themselves anew

* * *

The word sestina has been
Taken out of the original title. It is no use
(killing oneself?)
— Our world will not stand it,
the implication of a too regular form.

* * *

There should be today no use for a description of it
Only for a "movement" emphasizing its use, since it's
been around,

An accident in the twisting
Of many and diverse "thoughts"
I.e. nerves, glandular facilities, electrical cranial charges

Never subduing "The longing for touch to an idea."

Among the songs in *55* is at least one so tightly evolved that we see it now as a precursor of a style that may point the future for Zukofsky and others highly sensitized, viz. "who endure days like this." Ten years later (1950) the tension finds a simpler equation:

And without
Spring it is spring why
Is it death here grass somewhere
As dead as lonely walks
As living has less thought that is
The spring.

Spring it is spring why
Is it death grass somewhere
As dead as walks
As living has less thought that is
A spring. And without.

In much the same cyclic form appear these of 1953:

With
a Valentine
(the 12 February)

Hear, her
Clear
Mirror,
Care
His error.
In her
Care
Is clear.

With a Valentine
(The 14 February)

Hear her
(Clear mirror)
Care.
His error.
In her care —
Is clear.

Hear, her
Clear
Mirror,
Care
His error.
In her,
Care
Is clear.

Hear her
Clear mirror
Care his error
In her care
Is clear

Hear
Her
Clear
Mirror
Care
His
Error in
Her
Care
Is clear

Hear
Her
Clear,
Mirror,
Care
His
Error in
Her —
Care
Is
Clear.

“The 12 February” saying the opposite of Lord Herbert’s “In a Glass Window for Inconstancy,” but “The 14 February” perhaps a 20th century prayer: at any rate to the poet useful as object of movement and speech.

Multiple interest, poetry following an order of speech, new ideas generating new metrics — these are by now fairly well accepted criteria unless at times there is still “too much air in the air.” There is also the dictum to mean exactly what you mean. Poets who reach out ahead of readers necessarily find themselves called obscure. A current of reality always exists in Zukofsky even if involved. It is one of his own tenets that “The emotional quality of good poetry is founded on exact observation” (*A Test of Poetry*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, Ltd., London, 1952). *Anew* (1946) contains the lovely, minutely in-wreathed flowering of Zukofsky’s poetic genius. The poems are at once objective and intimate, written, many of them, for members of the family and for friends — sent to friends on postcards or valentines -- the years’ greetings whose forms are completed by Celia Zukofsky’s music. All of these are more or less subject to the order of Mozart’s “poetry must be the obedient daughter of music.”

*Anew*24:

The men in the kitchens
Their women in the foundries

The children in the wars
The old men at the boundaries.

*Anew*40, "Celia's birthday poem":

No ache, love's the way to start the New Year, —
chant then, "New Year" like "No ache" in your ear,
all the while I praise wind and love your face
above snow that melts over trees thru space:
carol "No ache" like "New Year" between trees
that removed still share a few centuries.

There are uncollected poems about little wrists and mittens and this:

Hello, little leaves,
Said not St. Francis
But my son in the spring,
Doing at two
(Neither really begged)
What it took the other —
He'd agree and laugh —
44 years to do.

With *Anew* we are given a sense of the perpetually active, as love is. William Carlos Williams has said, "This book is brilliant through an over-all consciousness of its own warmth, its own despairs, its own excellence in the writing. It is happy, happy of a welcoming warmth. That is one of its subtlest and most obvious successes — its serenity in love. For by knowing how to write Zukofsky has found it possible again to express love. You cannot express anything unless you invent how to express it. A poem is not a Freudian 'escape' (what childishness) but an adult release to knowledge, in the most practical, engineering manner."

Sounding out pretty much all of life, the first note of the fugue is present when the last note is struck.

And so till we have died
And grass with grass
Lie faceless as the grass

Grow sheathed with the grass.
Between our spines a hollow
The stillest sense will pass
Or weighted cloud will follow. (*Anew* 19)

Originally published in *Quarterly Review of Literature* 8.3 (1956):198-210.

The Poetry of Cid Corman

In Bashō's day, poems were left on posts. Today — and not surprisingly Japan-associated — we come upon several solitary posts — nine books in six years, poems rare and at the same time numerous, by the one author Cid Corman. He is also editor of the poetry journal *Origin*, his present home Kyoto.

Corman is the poet of quiet. "Each man an empire when he enters/a silence." And again: "There are things to be said. But to whom tell/the silences?" They're told but he's careful — o he's suspicious as the devil of too many words. Of thought, even —

The fabric

downstairs as
I look in
from the street

I can catch
the loom and
can sense the

heartbeat
strengthen the
night coming

"Not to have thought through/anything and yet/only through this day/to have thought at all."
Poems precise, plain and sweet —

At day's end
child asleep
in his arms

he steps light —
her bonnet
on his head.

And

The Offerings

Too many things on the altar.
A petal would do.
Or the ant that stops for a moment at it.

Reminds one of Williams' "The Red Wheelbarrow"? To add to "The Offerings" would be to hold up an extra finger as Basho said when he found the perfect poem. *All in All*, which contains this Corman poem, is in format and contents — a large book with drawings (illuminations) by Hidetaka Ohno — one of the most beautiful books of our time.

Short poems on large subjects: Wonder, Contentment. But solid. "Either you are here/or you're not. And/if you are, this is the place to stand" —

I picked a
leaf up

it weighed
my vision

I knelt and
placed it

almost
where it was

"to contemplate/contentment" —

Tea in the green fields
served by a monk, green
tea, all that he has.

Through the light thatched roof
the sky gets in and
at the edges more.

In fact, "One gets/to care less for all/save downright good feeling" —

The rain steadies
wisdom. After
the silences

are drummed out, from
the wild depths of
the heart the one

native hears truth.
He emerges
in the sun light.

And "hands clap/invoking warmth/beating time to/a slow snow."

Little still states. World news: sun on the sill; a bug: "A black and gold beetle/weights a grass/to whose end it walks"; the rain gathering at the end of the pine needle "in sudden water-buds that/as suddenly descend"; a friend who is quiet:

The hand that I hold to the light
fills. What more do I offer you,
my love, than what the light gives?

Use what there is, the poet tells himself, “the mystery of the simple seeing.” Express suspense. Express *listen!*—

rain stops
night knows when
to listen

what falls
glistens now
in the ear

In Corman country there is no violence or hate.

Basho’s concern was to publish very little, Cid Corman’s to publish and let the leaf stay where it falls. Let those read with joy who are worthy. And another year more leaves come into being.

Originally published in *Arts in Society* 3 (1965): 558-560.

A review of Louis Zukofsky's *A Test of Poetry*

Zukofsky's arrangement is as clean in form as its criticism and the good examples of poetry it offers. It is appraised correctly on the jacket of the book by Clifton Fadiman, Mark Van Doren and William Carlos Williams. Distilled excellence, rich portions from the poets from Homer thru the present, some of these difficult — poetry is not soft — supported by Zukofsky's precise interpretive remarks. "The lines of poetry of great emotional significance in any age are rare. To obtain, therefore, an accurate criticism of them and of the lesser work which surrounds them, reading should not shun analysis." To read for pleasure, that is the aim here. Poetry out of the "living processes" of everyday and from there "to always another phase of existence" — the world needs it.

What makes certain lines of poetry good and others not so good? Part II, the pivot for the entire book, begins so far as Zukofsky's remarks are concerned: "A simple order of speech is an asset in poetry." Next, in that section, regarding William Morris' roundabout translation of Homer: "He is piling it on thin." And we're off. Parts I and III offer more examples of good poetry, but without comment or authors' signatures — to add to the zest of a lovely game. A turn to the chronological chart shows the full use of an index with titles, authors, dates when supplemented by standards such as "content," "emotion," "inevitability," "measure." A book for the general sensitive reader — in classroom and out.

Zukofsky is moved, of course, by certain perceptions: the exact word; any word a poetic word "if used in the right order, with the right cadence, with a definite aim in view"; "song, one of the mainsprings of poetry"; a poem: "an emotional object" close to the people and their experiences, i.e., the source, something to put your hands on as against metaphysical rockers; "in any age" . . . "The lasting attraction in the words of a poem and its construction make it classic and contemporary at the same time."

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. The book could be bigger — the reader can make it so. Omissions — at first glance — until one realizes that it is more than an anthology.

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