

TABLE OF CONTENTS

JULY 2018

MICHELLE BITTING, *City of Angles*, pp.6–9

PETER ARVAN MANOS,
Recycling, p.11;
Dad's Watch, p.12

DONNA O'SHAUGHNESSY,
*What the Physicians in
the Conference Room
Don't Know About
the Housekeeper is*
(after Dennis
O'Driscoll), p.14

CATHERINE ESPOSITO PRESCOTT, *The Dictionary of Unknowns*, p.16

COLIN POPE, *Little Words*, pp.18–25

BOOK REVIEW: *The Short List of Certainties*
by LOIS ROMA-DEELEY reviewed by
MATTHEW WHEATLEY, pp.27–28

Volume six

T A B

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ISSUE
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THE CENTER FOR POETRY AT CHAPMAN UNIVERSITY

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p o e t i c a

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The print issues of *TAB: The Journal of Poetry & Poetics* are special editions, each published at the beginning of the calendar year. These issues reflect the mission of Tabula Poetica: The Center for Poetry at Chapman University to create an environment that celebrates poetry in various forms and venues. The annual print issue engages the reader with poetry as a material object and asks that the reader negotiate between image and text. The design of the print issues does not assume a traditional role of quietly framing content; instead, design actively shapes the reading experience. The special print editions of *TAB* continue to experiment and explore the intersections between form and content, object and space, and reader and reading.

The 2018 print issue amplifies the qualities in aesthetics and materials of ephemera as the main framework to poetry. Damien Gautier contributes his photography of urban typography showcasing various words, letters, and signs which have been rearranged and layered calling attention to the arbitrary size and two dimensions of both the physical photograph and the postcard. In today's world of excessive materials in a disposable culture, we revisit the function and permanence in a collection of postcards. We examine the origin and value of a postcard as a record of personal travel, propaganda, and advertisement and how some collections end up being documents of preservation.

Electronic issues, on the second Wednesday of every other month, follow this printed issue. Using these differing formats—print and digital—allows experimentation with design and materiality in a time when print and electronic dissemination coexist. *TAB* will not force either format to adapt to the other. The reading experience in virtual spaces is different than that of a printed journal. The electronic issues are shaped by Open Journal Systems, a federally funded, open-access system from the Public Knowledge Project designed to serve the public good globally. While the electronic files can be printed, each electronic issue are formatted for reading on the screen. Decisions about page size, typography, and composition are driven by the online reading experience, rather than to mimic a print version. *TAB* also makes use of the audio possibilities of digital dissemination.

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MICHELLE BITTING

Michelle Bitting's third collection, *The Couple Who Fell to Earth*, was named to Kirkus Review's Best Books of 2016. Her work appears in *The American Poetry Review*, *Narrative*, *New York Times*, *Vinyl Poetry*, *Plume*, *Diode*, *Paris-American*, *Green Mountains Review*, and *Poetry Daily* and *Verse Daily*. Her book *Broken Kingdom* is forthcoming in 2019.

Card.



TOM JONES

S.A.

Texas

CITY OF ANGELS

The L.A. River is a memory,
its gulches pinned
with carcasses of cats

tossed to ditch trickle
and flies. Museums

bulge here, bright
with taxidermied wonders.
It's like

I died and float in heaven.

Witness the apparition: birds
fly overhead, winged
workers, undocumented,
shitting Pollocks
across my windshield.

Let it go, Boys. Let it go!

And enter another off-ramp,
another sea
of orange vests and cones,

another road
in perpetual state
of renewal. This life.

If love rains down
will we still love us? The raids

are underway
oversees, launched full swing
and strung from headlines.

So-called enemies
a cell text away

and all this time
I thought we were friends.

One hand clicks
while the other lifts a spoon
of fragrant rice
in a suburban kitchen.

You've never heard silence
that peculiar or loud
falling on
flesh and steel.

There's so much work to be done.

Now children run
from bricks and mortar
and I can't fill these pages fast enough.

City of speed,
freeway taco stands,
Chinatown
and Hop Louie's

where Singapore Slings
still flow,
thanks be to mud.

Of good vibes
and rad wave sets
along a rippled Malibu shore,

matched to the sun gods' abs
and foreheads
of homeless

who fish the innards
of recycling bins
like self-appointed surgeons.

Everyday shit. *Idiot love*
will spark a fusion
from where I sit.

Palm trees nodding off,
bent at the waist
over another traffic stalemate,

the blind burn
of chrome when you
think of it.

All those hearts
and nobody moves.

N° 1488.

2

[155x125]

PETER ARVAN MANOS

Peter Arvan Manos writes and consults on renewable sources of electricity. His poetry has been published in the *New York Times* and in many poetry journals.

NOTE IMPORTANTE.
valeurs recouvrables à PARIS, se co-
aux indications figurant au verso du
dureau n° 1485.

NOTE IMPORTANTE.
valeurs recouvrables à PARIS, se co-
aux indications figurant au verso du
dureau n° 1485.

ANGERS R.P.
323

RÉPUBLIQUE FRANÇAISE.

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RECOURRER.

Mary

G. Lillard

e. Marson

Ch. Luperon



(1) Indications à biffer d'un trait de plume, s'il s'agit de valeurs réexpédiées.

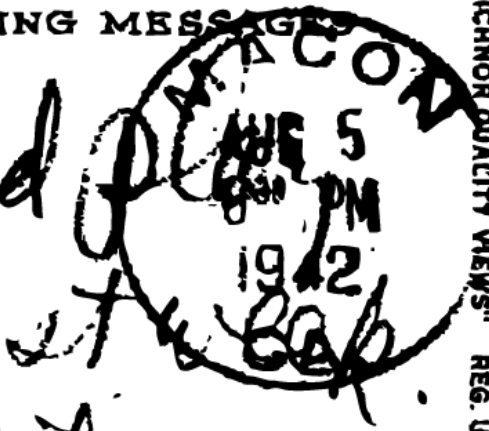
RECYCLING

He goes to the old landfill
to try to find the real dirt
and he digs in the sand
and he finds a tiny porcelain doll
and he places it safely off on the side
and he chooses a special place for a mulch pile
and he rakes many leaves up into the mulch pile
and he takes out the sticks
and he takes out the half-inch thick asphalt chips
and he doesn't know where he should put them
and he takes some of them away with him
and he throws them out in the garbage
and he hopes they end up in a better place the second time around
and he stomps on the mulch pile
and he turns it upside-down to help it turn into the real dirt
and he returns to the same spot years later
and he mounds a mound out of the new soil
and he places the porcelain doll on top of it
and he plants a tree by the porcelain doll
and he never leaves the place for very long
and he ends up dying there
and he ends up in the real dirt himself
but no one knows but
softer and softer
in turn he turns in
earth with Earth's
grasp at last.

DAD'S WATCH

what i'm in is my back yard but it is a junkyard and i am walking through it hearing a caw and wondering what i am to do with all this junk and look up and see a seagull swooping to me and landing near me and i see the old self-winding gold omega wristwatch my father wore when he went all around the world in the merchant marines around the seagull's long cylindrical body and i then get the thought that i could pawn off my father's wristwatch and then (despite the praises my dad always gave seagulls repeatedly telling me—as if for the first time—that despite being junk birds seagulls were his favorite birds, given how without labor unwaveringly they'd hover so beautifully in the breeze) with my work boot i kick the bird's watch off but as i reach for the watch suddenly jumping up onto my arm the seagull now has an eagle's talons and latches onto my wrists like handcuffs and lifts me up unpredictably before i stand to be taken where i don't know.

ING MESSAGES



ile me
think
if any -
right

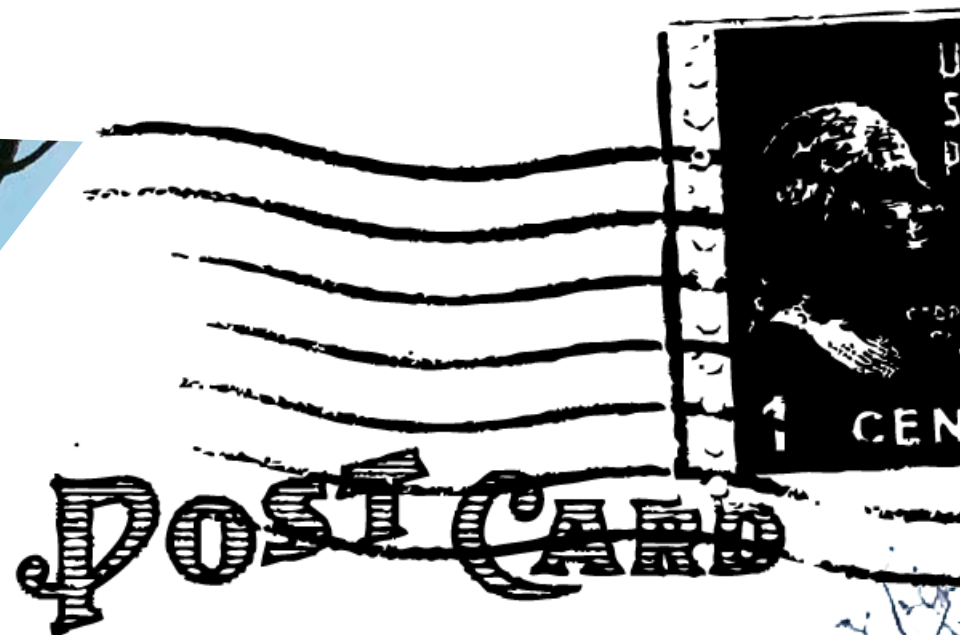
10.

Please write me
what you think
about it & /

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DONNA O'SHAUGHNESSY

Donna O'Shaughnessy resides in Central Illinois. A retired hospice nurse, she received The Dermot Healy International Poetry Award in 2016. Her work has appeared in *The Galway Review*, *Ropes*, and *After Hours*.



on Windham

BY SERVICE NEWS CO.

WHAT THE PHYSICIANS IN THE CONFERENCE ROOM DON'T KNOW ABOUT THE HOUSEKEEPER IS
(AFTER DENNIS O'DRISCOLL)

That she is 61
That her mate left her
That she has two other jobs
That she is working a double shift
That she'll walk home two miles all alone
That she'll remove all the toxic waste they leave
That she just mopped the surgery after a botched abortion
That she disposed of the abandoned bourbon bottles in their offices
That she disinfected the exam room items after the teen overdose vomited
That she removed blood from the toilet used by the hemorrhaging cancer patient
That her part-time status is insufficient to qualify her for hospital medical insurance
That she is so tired
 she could die



From *Commendancy of Zefar*

CATHERINE ESPOSITO PRESCOTT

Catherine Esposito Prescott is the author of the chapbooks *Maria Sings* and *The Living Ruin*. Recent poems have appeared in *Bellevue Literary Review*, *MiPOesias*, *Pleiades*, *Poetry East*, *Southern Poetry Review*, and *The Orison Anthology*. She is co-founder of the not-for-profit organization SWWIM (Supporting Women Writers in Miami), which curates a reading series and publishes *SWWIM Every Day*.

THE DICTIONARY OF UNKNOWNNS

Yet this small pocket is tight, and it's the same size it's always been—abacus-exact molecule for molecule—without even an exchange system, a one-in, one-out kind of thing. No, these molecules are for keeps—scrubbed clean or buffed with soot—the same ones inhaled and exhaled by award-winning geniuses and jail-side criminals, parades of saints and sinners, not to mention our quadruped ancestors, and the apes and orangutans, elephants, parrots, flamingos, crocodiles, lizards, snakes, papaya trees, banana plants, passion flowers, grass blades, and every single accounted for living thing known to ever exist, and this doesn't even begin to admit the dictionary of unknowns—those growing in dense brush on the bottom of an unreachable inch of forest, an unconquerable square of earth, the ones who work for little glory, who exhale hard for all of us.

COLIN POPE

Colin Pope has published prose and poetry in journals such as *Slate*, *Willow Springs*, *Rattle*, *Linebreak*, *Los Angeles Review*, *Texas Review*, and *Best New Poets*, among others. He is the recipient of an Academy of American Poets Prize and is currently a doctoral student at Oklahoma State University, where he serves on the editorial staff at *Cimarron Review*.

camp #2 on copper
the Crawford Copper
offices 622-623 Secu
Bldg. Los Angeles, C

(1) Indications à biffer d'un trait de plume, s'il s'agit de valeurs réexpédiées.

PACT - PUB

LITTLE WORDS

Louis Zukofsky and the so-called Objectivist poets had been largely forgotten by the late 1940s. To be sure, the impact of the Objectivists was felt minimally even during their heyday in the 1930s, but by mid-century, their contributions had been almost entirely swallowed or obscured by the successes of other, more well-known groups of poets.

So, when Zukofsky published his essay "*Poetry/For My Son When He Can Read*" in a small magazine in 1948, nobody took much notice of his odd statements on the virtues of articles and "little words":

The poet wonders why so many today have raised up the word 'myth,' finding the lack of so-called 'myths' in our time a crisis the poet must overcome or die from, as it were, having become too radioactive, when instead a case can be made out for the poet giving some of his life to the use of the words *the* and *a*: both of which are weighted with as much epos and historical destiny as one man can perhaps resolve. Those who do not believe this are too sure that the little words mean nothing among so many other words. (10)

Of course, this represents only a small portion of the essay, but implicit in this statement is Zukofsky's belief in a sincerity that came to define Objectivist poetry. Rather than seeking "myths" (a barb directed at the influence of *The Waste Land*), Zukofsky prefers a realism grounded in language. Zukofsky's perspective on words is one of the major reasons why the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets used his work as a springboard.

But, in particular, this passage points to poetry's traditional privileging of "big words" over "little words," or at least the privileging of the perceived definitions of those words in conjunction with one another over *the words themselves*, as objects. In short, if we contrast Ezra Pound's or T. S. Eliot's poetics against this statement, what we find is that poetic movements like Imagism are working on a scale too large for Zukofsky's liking. If an image, as Pound defined it, is an "intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time" which "gives that sense of sudden liberation; freedom from time limits and space limits," then what happens if we dissolve this "complex?" (63). What do the words mean when removed from this assembly? Moreover, what happens to time and space if the complex is dissolved, and what would a poem freed from any convenient definitions of such a complex look like?

Here, Zukofsky offers as a starting point the articles *a* and *the*. In of itself, Zukofsky's isolation of these words speaks volumes. There is, perhaps, no set of words in the English language which would be more difficult to poeticize than articles. No other major critic or poet of the nineteenth or twentieth centuries made any attempt to discuss the impact of these words on poetics. Even the suggestion that such a thing could be undertaken is revolutionary when viewed in the context of the dominant, Eurocentric literary traditions from which Zukofsky is operating. And though Saussurean linguistics were still in their nascence, Zukofsky may have also been aware that a semiotic study of the article *a* would be nearly impossible. Articles signify only this: the distinctions between the definite and indefinite, the certain and uncertain.

In terms of Objectivist poetics, there could be no clearer issue at stake in the interwar world than the separation between that which is certain and that which is uncertain. Compared to the established poetic thinking of the time, Objectivist theories of poetics in relation to language, time, and space were revolutionary. In "An Objective," Zukofsky makes clear the interweaving of language and time as inextricable, noting how, in poetry, it is "*Impossible* to communicate anything but particulars—historic and contemporary—things, human beings as things [are] bound up with events and contingencies.

The revolutionary word if it must revolve cannot escape having a reference. It is not infinite. Even the infinite is a term” (16). For Zukofsky, George Oppen, and the other Objectivists, poems are sites of metacognition. Through the cataloguing of these “particulars,” poems present a construct of the moment of their creation, and, as such, they capture how the material object of a word succeeds or falters in its representation of its references in relation to the other words in the poem and their concomitant references. Unlike Imagism, however, this construct is self-referential and ultimately ineffable. Or, as he writes later in the same essay, “An idea—not an empty concept. An idea—its value including its meaning. The desk i.e. as object including its value” (16). The poem commingles language and experience to offer an “idea,” pushing towards the sincerity of existence at a particular point in time. In the strain for this idea, the reader might be afforded a glimpse at what life is really like at that moment, perhaps resembling what Jacques Derrida would define as “aporia,” or a state of paradoxical puzzlement. Sincerity, in Objectivist terms, is the sincere state of what it means to be human, the words and moments an admixture of the certain and uncertain, revolving around the objects which define existence. (Here, it’s also worth pausing to consider the close ties between Objectivism and Marxism and how these connections shine through in Zukofsky’s stressing of “value” in the above quote.)

This emphasis on the materiality of language runs contrary to the more dominant poetics of the mid-twentieth century. As critic Michael Davidson points out, “Although Objectivism shares many features with other modernist movements (exactitude and sincerity are features valued by New Critics and Objectivists alike), the sense that language is fatally connected to (even constitutive of) social materiality sets it apart” (23). This contrast with New Criticism clarifies the Objectivist approach to language and why, perhaps, Zukofsky felt the need to highlight the import of little words. That *all* words have materiality, particularly in relation to our social existence, marks one of Objectivism’s major departures from New Criticism and Poundian or Eliotian poetics. Even William Carlos Williams’s cogitations on the intersection between language and imagination in *Spring and All* fail to fully address the materiality of parts of speech like articles.

Zukofsky’s incredulity toward the definite, apocalyptic view presented by *The Waste Land* is part and parcel of this departure and of his emphasis on these little words. What could be a bigger contrast? While Eliot contemplates a grand, sweeping vision of a post-moral world, Zukofsky suggests that articles contain as much meaning and history as could be found in any religio-ethical mythos. Nowhere is this disparity better illustrated than in Zukofsky’s 1928 poem, “Poem beginning, ‘The.’” In what would eventually be considered his first important work, Zukofsky places the definite article front and center in the title and in the first line. This choice establishes “The” as parody from the get-go:

1 The
2 Voice of Jesus I. Rush singing
3 in the wilderness (1-3)

The most unsuspecting, harmless word from Eliot’s title is here given force and gravity via repetition, begging an astute reader to grasp towards some form of New Critical explication of the poem (as in, what might this title mean?). The poem, however, immediately resists this type of analysis, dropping the reader into a fabricated “wilderness” that satirizes the wasteland.

Zukofsky does not give his reader a promontory from which to interpret any type of definitive message. As Bruce Comens states in *Apocalypse and After*, “Anyone seeking the certainty of ‘the,’ the poem implies, is seeking, even presuming, a divine speech—the word become flesh” (135). There will be no sermonizing on moral turpitude or the effects of war, and, instead, readers are treated to an exegesis on the value of uncertainty. And rather than adopting a serious, divine presence via Jesus, the sacred voice is refigured as “Jesus I. Rush,” a comic allusion, perhaps, to Eliot’s rushing towards the certitude of his worldview. Zukofsky points to the arbitrary nature of such a view, suggesting that this certitude is itself a designator of the holes in Eliot’s morality. Comens writes, “Because certainty depends on the already known, the unknown is perceived as a chaos of uncertainty, and tactical possibilities are foreclosed in the search for strategic control and security” (135). To Zukofsky, the very notion that there is one true outcome for the postwar world—and that one man could play scribe to such a vision—is ludicrous, and if a lesson were to be gleaned from the war, it is that there can be no certainty.

So Zukofsky situates himself at the crossroads of the definite and indefinite, with his “little words” standing as perfunctory signposts. As I’ve said, the very purpose of articles is to distinguish between the certain and uncertain, but what Zukofsky asserts is the further dimension of the relationship between sincerity and certainty. It’s important to remember the distinction between the very specific Objectivist definition of sincerity and the more generalized modernist or New Critical definition (which Michael Davidson may be conflating in the quote from above). The New Critics held, more or less, to a somewhat loose definition of sincerity centered around the uncovering of so-called high truth or pure realization or genuine emotion. In the glossary of Cleanth Brooks’s and Robert Penn Warren’s classic poetry manual *Understanding Poetry*, sincerity is given a vague and lengthy entry that rests on a fulcrum between sentimentality and “the degree of success which the poet has achieved in integrating the various elements of a poem.” The clarification: “When one says that a poem is ‘sincere,’ one is actually saying, consciously or unconsciously, that it does not overreach itself, that it is not sentimental. Such a judgment is irrelevant to any biographical information concerning the poet” (559). The ambiguous nature of this definition exposes the central problem of sincerity for New Critics; as a Fugitive poet, Warren found himself backed up against the brick wall of irony (for which there is a glossary entry three times longer than sincerity’s). Other modernists held similar beliefs; Eliot, for instance, even as he argues for the “impersonal” in “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” writes, “There are many people who appreciate the expression of sincere emotion in verse, and there is a smaller number of people who can appreciate technical excellence. But very few know when there is an expression of *significant* emotion, emotion which has its life in the poem and not in the history of the poet” (Eliot 116). Most modernist definitions can’t seem to escape from vague conceptions of sentiment or truth, and they tend to view sincerity through a teleological lens, as an outcome and measure of the poem’s proper execution.

The seemingly strategic ambiguity surrounding sincerity purports a modernist view of this term as akin to *honesty*, and *honesty* as akin to *certainty*. For instance, Eliot’s *The Waste Land* could be called an honest and certain modernist prospectus for the twentieth century. Impersonal though it may be, Eliot imbued this poem with assumptions based upon his perceived truths. Zukofsky negated any such definitions of sincerity, turning the term inside out. For the Objectivists, sincerity is more closely linked to *uncertainty*. Though imagistic constructs occur in Objectivist poems, at the heart of the issue of sincerity is the delicate balance of word against word and how they figure the sincerity of moments of existence. Zukofsky writes,

“Though meanings change, a linguistic etiquette, a record possibly clear to us as the usage of a past context—The context as it first meant—or if this may not be believed—an arrived-at equilibrium—or at least the past not even guessed by us arrived at an equilibrium of meaning determined by new meanings of word against word contemporarily read” (16). Though the words will shift when placed against one another and the overall meaning will change, there is an “equilibrium of meaning” that will outlast the poet. This meaning, however, is not a certitude, but a presentation of context, a palimpsest which points to the moment of the poem’s creation. The sincerity offered is a sincerity built on the admission of an inexact, uncertain combination of words which, at most, can attain an equilibrium between what they once meant and what they could mean.

Set against this definition of sincerity, the reason Zukofsky views the word *the* as dangerous (especially when put in front of any type of prophetic vision) becomes obvious. Not only does *the* inhere a linguistic certainty, but it negates the possibility of any “tactical possibilities” for the poem’s interpretation. In this, Eliot’s is a closed form; Zukofsky’s is open. One need only look at Zukofsky’s lifelong, 24-part serial poem “A”—a project which took roughly fifty years to complete—to see the ideological difference. “A,” like “Poem beginning ‘The,’” places enormous weight on the article in its title and in its first line:

A
 Round of fiddles playing Bach.
Come, ye daughters, share my anguish –
 Bare arms, black dresses,
See Him! Whom?
 Bediamond the passion of our Lord,
See Him! How?
 His legs blue, tendons bleeding,
O Lamb of God most holy!
 Black full dress of the audience. (1-10)

The repetition of the article again makes a statement, but this time that statement urges toward the indefinite and uncertain. “A” commences with a strange scene: Zukofsky’s attending a concert of Bach’s *St. Matthew Passion* (the italicized lines are lyrics translated from German), where poor violinists are playing for wealthy, bediamonded audience members at Carnegie Hall on Passover. Critics have noted the fullness of this beginning in relation to Zukofsky’s major themes: Marxism and class, religion, musicality of language. But the major import of that first *A* resting atop the mountain of all the words to come is similarly integral to comprehending the immensity of the work. The poem is shaped like an upside-down skyscraper, set upon on a tiny, integral point of sincerity, as figured by the indefinite.

The sincerity the reader feels is meant to parallel the writer’s attempt to capture the sincerity of the moment of the poem’s creation. In this, it is the opposite of Eliot’s or the New Critics’ perceptions of the poem; rather than pointing to the “impersonal” or the irrelevancy of any “biographical information concerning the poet,” Zukofsky’s vision permeates the site of entry into the poem. We are looking through his eyes and gazing at a scene of religious and socioeconomic disjunction. This is not a sentimental sight (as Brooks and Warren warned against), but a site of confusion and puzzlement. How has this experience manifested itself? What piece of human history is being witnessed and what could it mean? We carom between

the musicians, the socialites, eighteenth century Germany (via Bach), Christian antiquity, and all points between. The words point to one another without stating these connections, but they emerge nonetheless.

This open usage of language carries us back to the original question: does Zukofsky show us what a poem is when the images and other language complexes are dissolved? Do the “little words” provide a key to better understandings of a poet’s language usage and, therefore, sincerity? Or, perhaps, more to the point: if the articles do an adequate job of holding their weight in relation to bigger words, does this mean the equilibrium of meaning in the poem tilts toward the sincere?

One way to approach these questions is by looking at another Objectivist work, to see if the tenets Zukofsky laid out hold their meaning among members of the same movement. George Oppen’s *Discrete Series*, published in 1934, represents another Objectivist highwater mark. The slim volume came out three years after Zukofsky’s “An Objective” and is, more or less, the most cohesive, structurally unified collection by a single Objectivist poet published during the time of the movement. Oppen, of course, shared many of Zukofsky’s beliefs about structure and language. Sincerity figured as a key component of Oppen’s writing, and *Discrete Series* showcases this from the beginning of the first section:

The knowledge not of sorrow, you were
saying, but of boredom
Is—aside from reading speaking
smoking——
Of what, Maude Blessingbourne it was,
wished to know when, having risen,
“approached the window as if to see
what really was going on”;
And saw rain falling in the distance
more slowly,
The road clear from her past the window-
glass——
Of the world, weather-swept, with which
one shares the century. (1-14)

For Oppen, sincerity equates to a knowledge of boredom; the poet points toward an existential state of psychic openness revealed through this knowledge. Many critics have pointed out that this poem prefigures Heidegger’s thoughts on boredom as a condition which places us in a state of “fundamental attunement” with the passage of time and of our own being (80).

But the major pieces are all here: a concern with time, a pointing outward to referents, and even a nod to Marxism (Maude Blessingbourne is an upper-middle class woman in a Henry James novel, limited by both her gender and social class). Though the inclusion of this character seems a strangely flip maneuver, it represents the Objectivist ideal of placing the reader in a space of contextual uncertainty. Similarly, the conversational nature of this passage forces the reader into the indefinite. There is a specific “you” to which these words are being directed, but we are not allowed that information. We can’t see Maude’s window or rain or road. The first clearly available markers of place or context come at the end, and they are

gigantic (and, though the definite article precedes them, they're read as indefinite via their abstract usage): "world" and "century."

Propping up all these words is a flurry of definite articles. Oppen begins the passage by referring to "*The knowledge*" (emphasis mine), as though there is a definite set of epistemological principles governing this conversation, but they are just out of range of the poem. This ambiguity is a toying with what linguists refer to as schema theory. In *Language and World Creation in Poems and Other Texts*, Elena Semino provides a definition: "A schema is a portion of background knowledge that contains generic information about different types of events, situations, people or objects [...] schemata are important sources of inferences and expectations" (18). For instance, if a composition teacher is speaking to students about writing and points to the introduction, the conclusion, or the argument, the schema at work is basic academic essay structure. Though no specific, definite introduction is being referenced in the conversation, the teacher activates this schema by speaking of the general idea of the introduction using the definite article, as in, "The introduction should set up the argument." There is neither a definite introduction nor argument being discussed, but the students and teacher realize that, within this context, they need only activate the schema by using the definite article to have a point of reference for the conversation. So, when Oppen invites us into this poem with "the knowledge," the reader infers that there is a schema being activated. This is simply how humans learn the English language; the use of the definite article in front of a noun infers a cataphoric structure, forcing us to read on to try to decipher the schema. But the poem never truly offers a schema. There is no specific situation, no place from which to infer meaning. The closest we get is that this is a conversation schema, and there is a distinct "you" being addressed (though we never know who it is).

The definite articles in this passage prop up the uncertainty of the situation in a way that reinforces the lack of a schema. As such, the reader has no choice but to venture through the poem as though it were sincere, in an Objectivist sense. Oppen gives us no indicator of irony or of any play in the uncertainty of this vision. In this, the poem resembles a type of conversation between two people who don't speak quite the same language. If one were speaking to a foreigner, for example, and this foreigner only had a very basic knowledge of the English language, one wouldn't expect to hear any irony, puns, or other upper-level schema-usage of the language. In this context, Oppen is the foreigner, unwilling to activate the schema that two fluent speakers normally would. In his 1950 germinal work on articles, *The Tell-Tale Article*, Rostrevor Hamilton asserts that, "The poet's use of the definite article often suggests that he has become absorbed and isolated in his own vision" (14). I would suggest that Oppen's opening section of *Discrete Series* points to the poet's absorption in his vision by refusing to give us any schema beyond a blank, conversational one with no real context. This conversational tenor tells the reader that, while the poet may be altogether certain of his vision, he's as yet unwilling or unable to share it with the reader, and this uncertainty between reader and writer will be read as both sincere and ambiguous. In point of fact, Oppen uses no indefinite articles in this section (versus six definite ones). The weight of Oppen's definite articles is that they move the reader from seeking schema to accepting his vision, and they force us to lean into the sincerity being deployed, even—or especially—though the situation may be confusing.

This sincerity comes partly from the halting, over-punctuated language which reads like someone sputtering to find the words for their idea. The cataphora of the passage pushes us through to the end, though readers are only loosely aware of

the conversation schema and a syntactical motion toward meaning. Simply put, we know someone is speaking and we know we're supposed to listen and interpret, but these are the only things revealed here.

This is how the reader enters the second section of the poem—with all of these uncertainties in mind—and via this uncertainty Oppen's mastery becomes clear. The first section is the only section of the book with this conversational quality. Oppen knew that he had to ease his reader slowly into this world of uncertainty, simply to make it more navigable. But with the second section the book begins a complete withdrawal from schemata, and the definite article maintains its hold as an important and weighty component for maintaining the uncertainty and sincerity of the collection:

White. From the
Under Arm of T

The red globe.

Up
Down. Round
Shiny fixed
Alternatives

From the quiet

Stone floor... (15-23)

This passage would be nearly incomprehensible without some minor clues to the fact that we are still operating by the normal rules of the English language. This is where definite articles begin to pull double duty as structural glue and as indexical pointers to Oppen's vision. Though astute readers may be able to decipher the situation as a person's standing before an elevator, this explication would be nearly impossible without the definite articles pushing towards a specific vision. More than this, the specificity of Oppen's vision—as indicated by these articles—becomes the focal point of the poem. Though we don't have access to what Oppen sees, we are aware that he situates himself in a specific time and space that is outside the knowledge of the reader.

The definite articles are integral to any understanding of this poem or of Oppen's work. Readers search their minds for some schema or definite reference, but instead are forced to see the poem as lacking these. The poem is purely a catalog of the poet's eye, and that we are offered any clues to specificity reinforces the sincerity of his vision; the sincerity emerges from the uncertainty and the knowledge of a specific poetic vision. That these words create a context from which we can build an understanding exemplifies the Objectivist poetic in action. Emotion and truth do not factor into this sincerity, but rather the sense of puzzlement which represents a sincere state of existence. In Oppen's *Discrete Series*, the articles hold a weight in the "equilibrium of meaning" which forces readers to see this state of existence, at least through Oppen's eyes.

In an Objectivist sense, the only specificity that can be figured from this poem might be the specificity of time and place.

Like Zukofsky, Oppen captures this moment via the details and the relationship of one word to the next. Though it's nearly impossible to see this vision without a locus of understanding (what elevators looked like in thirties), what we can figure is that the lack of schema, context, and even tonal considerations points to what Oppen wants his readers to take away from the poem. Readers should be confused, at least on a linguistic level. The scene is disorienting, both within the framework of its structure and the presentation of its setting. Simply put, there are definite objects in this world—colors, globes, floors—but confusion at what these things mean, at how one arrives at this point in human existence, is natural and worth contemplating.

The mistake of the modern world is in our rushing toward acceptance of phenomena; rather, living inside puzzlement affords us rare opportunities to learn and to hope for more. In terms of articles, perhaps the real Objectivist lesson is not only that these words can point to faulty systems of knowledge, but that the distinction between the definite and indefinite is a fabrication which poetry has the singular ability to collapse.

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Dear Alice, Did I tell
you that Luciani is
lending me
Summer
T. Carnegie
Sept? So if
you go in
until she goes
institute is
Bureau de poste
Département
F. ent
C. des
L. inférieure
Kone!

VALEURS À RECOURIR.
Great Burroughs
Moss.

ORTANT.
rables à PARIS, se so
ription p. 35.
s figurant au verso du

1871
38
35

**THE SHORT LIST OF CERTAINTIES BY LOIS ROMA-DEELEY
FRANCISCAN UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2017**

In the epigraph to part one of *The Short List of Certainties*, Lois Roma-Deeley quotes St. Augustine of Hippo, saying, “Hope has two beautiful daughters. Their names are anger and courage; anger at the way things are, and courage to see that they do not remain the way they are.” Throughout this collection, Roma-Deeley uses multiple and uncertain realities to explore those two things: anger and courage.

One of the ways she creates these unstable worlds is by crossing out words. One such poem that does this is, “~~The Mirage of Saints confess Their Unholy Thoughts.~~” She writes, “~~But not until~~ I beat my breast as the ~~army~~ of saints / come toward me—” The interplay between the crossed and not crossed-out sections create a tension of two realities conflicting with one another. In the one, good and holy saints approach the author. In the other, a marauding army of saints approaches. In this, the certainty of how to interpret the scene is removed. Roma-Deeley skillfully plays with these kinds of tensions, building and releasing them throughout the collection.

Roma-Deeley creates multiple realities in another way in “Ghost-Stepping.” As the narrator and another person, referred to as “you,” walk down the street and into an apartment of a Wall Street banker and his wife, a separation and togetherness between the selves is created. The you and I are separate, but speak together to the woman. The woman hears the voice of her younger self in the closet, she being then both young and old, inside and outside. Who these people are and their relation to one another are uncertain. The you and I are almost on another plain, able to interact with the husband and wife, but not able to be seen. Roma-Deeley wields this confluence of realities well, creating a rich world full on tension and intrigue.

It is in these uncertain and multiple places that the commonalties between them show the reader the aspects of life that seem certain. One of the most common similarities between the poems is the presence of pain and violence, even if not in a physical sense. In “~~The Mirage of Saints confess Their Unholy Thoughts,~~” both the narrator and reader feel the violence of the crossed-out reality seep into the uncrossed-out one. She writes, “Now the noonday sun stares me down / ... / guides my hand ~~against my will.~~” Even though part of it is struck through, it is read along with the rest of the poem. The violent undercurrent cannot be removed.

The same theme of felt violence occurs in “Ghost-Stepping” as well. The woman hears her younger self:

beaten for speaking. For being silent. For ears
sticking out from her head like a cup.
For pee running down her leg. For breathing
too loudly. For being
anything at all.

For the woman, the pain and violence that was inflicted upon her in her youth has become an ever-present certainty, even years later when she is married and well-off. There are not many things about our reality that the book shows can be known for certain, but the fact that there will be pain is one of them.

This pain and violence comes in many forms, from war and abuse in the previous two poems, to sexual assault, the pain of losing a loved one, insanity, becoming irrelevant, Boko Haram, and mass shootings. How the violence will be perpetrated is uncertain. That it will be perpetrated is certain. This, in a sense, becomes the anger of the opening epigraph. The reader can feel Roma-Deeley's displeasure with the way things are, such as in "Me and J. Alfred," when she writes, "This is not how it goes. / This is not how it went." The repeating of "not" creates a sense of just anger over the state of affairs.

Fortunately, the collection does not end on such a dour note. The final and titular poem, *The Short List of Certainties*, takes the anger and violence from the previous poems, and transforms them into the courage to make things different. At the end of the poem, she writes, "Let us at last—or at least—bless the empty desert as if it were a blank page. Then, having courage, let us write a word or phrase on the short list of certainties something that sounds very much like praise." At the end, the narrator takes back the agency, writing something good in the list of certainties. The narrator is working to counterbalance all the pain that has already been recorded there throughout the collection.

The Short List of Certainties is an excellent collection of poems that deals with the pain that we all must face, and ultimately, how in spite of that pain, we all must choose our path out from it.