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Carl Rakosi

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Reviewed work(s):

Source: *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (Spring, 1969), pp. 178-192

Published by: [University of Wisconsin Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1207759>

Accessed: 18/11/2011 11:39

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CARL RAKOSI

Q. I wonder whether we could begin, Mr. Rakosi, with biography. You consider yourself a Midwesterner, don't you?

A. Actually, I was born in Berlin, Germany. My parents were Hungarian Jews who happened to be living there at the time. When I was a year old, the family moved back to Hungary and I lived in Baja, a small town in the south, until I was six. And then my father, my brother, and I came to this country—that was in 1910. We came first to Chicago, then moved to Gary, Indiana, and finally wound up in Kenosha, Wisconsin. So Kenosha was really my hometown. That's where I was brought up and went to school. Then I went to the University of Wisconsin and got a degree in English and a master's in educational psychology.

Q. How did you end up in social work?

A. It was sheer accident. This was a period of severe economic distress and it was extremely difficult to get a job anywhere. I happened to be talking to somebody who was also looking for a job and he said, "Why don't you go into social work?" I didn't even know what it was. He didn't either, but he told me there was an office in Chicago where they were hiring people, so I went down there. This was the American Association of Social Workers office, and if you were alive and had a degree, they hired you, there was such a shortage of personnel. And if you were a man, they spread out the red carpet for you. I started out with an agency in Cleveland. I had not by any means given up the idea of writing; I thought I could do both. But I fell in love with social work and that was my undoing as a poet, in a sense. I didn't actually give up the idea of trying to write poetry until the

late 'thirties when I was fooling around with different things. I left social work for a while and came back to the University. . . . I thought maybe if I went into psychiatry, this would give me something I could do and still write. Anyhow, social work just drew me very strongly. But it wasn't until the late 'thirties that it seemed impossible for me to be a social worker and to write at the same time.

Q. That's very interesting because the dust jacket on *Amulet* states that you stopped writing because you were disillusioned with a world in which poetry no longer had a place.

A. That is another element, too. During the 'thirties I was working in New York—this was during the very depth of the Depression—and any young person with any integrity or intelligence had to become associated with some left-wing organization. You just couldn't live with yourself if you didn't. So I got caught up very strongly in the whole Marxian business. I took very literally the basic Marxian ideas about literature having to be an instrument for social change, for expressing the needs and desires of large masses of people. And believing that, I couldn't write poetry, because the poetry that I could write could not achieve these ends.

Q. Perhaps we can talk for a while about the kind of poetry you had been writing. I know that your work appeared in Louis Zukofsky's "*Objectivists*" *Anthology* and that you are presently considered to be one of the objectivists *per se*. Williams mentions in his *Autobiography* that he got together with Zukofsky, Charles Reznikoff, George Oppen, and Basil Bunting to launch the movement around 1928 or so. I was wondering whether you participated in any of the discussions.

A. That is not correct. Williams did not get together with those men to found the objectivist movement. And I doubt whether it is a movement in the sense in which that word is generally used. The term really originated with Zukofsky, and he pulled it out of a hat. It was not an altogether accurate way of designating the few people assembled in the anthology and also in the "Objectivist" issue of *Poetry*. But he wanted some kind of name, and he checked out the term with me and, I assume, with some of the other people. The name was all right, but I told him I didn't think some of the poems in the anthology were "objectivist" or very objective in meaning. He said, "Well, that's true," but I've forgotten the reasons he gave for sticking to the name. It didn't matter. But Williams had very little to do with it. He was included, but it didn't come from his initiative.

Q. I see. Well, in any case, would you say that you could write poetry that was “objectivist”—whatever it meant—whereas you couldn’t write poetry that was Marxist? And that finally because objectivist poetry had no social implications, it became meaningless to you, and that was perhaps one of the reasons you simply gave up poetry?

A. No, no. I never took my association with Zukofsky and the others that seriously. After all, I was living in the Middle West, except for a brief period in New York when I was seeing Zukofsky, and I didn’t even know any of the other people.

Q. Did Zukofsky himself make an impression on you?

A. He came along at a time when it was very important for me to have someone like him around. I’d send him something to look at and it would come back with just a few comments, but they were always right on the nose. He seemed to know better than I what was true Rakosi and what was not. I really have a very warm feeling for Louis for this critical feedback. We had a most interesting correspondence. I still have his letters, incidentally, although I don’t think Louis would want them revealed. They’re very short, like some of his poems. If Louis could get something on a postage stamp, he’d do it.

Q. What about Zukofsky’s poetry?

A. I believe it has a strong sense of form—it is very firmly structured; the interstitching, you might say, is extremely fine and stands up remarkably well. I also feel, however, that there are some self-defeating things in his work; his personal self, his humanity, seldom comes through the way it really is. I find this regrettable because fundamentally I think he is a warm person. The many ellipses in his work bother me because they represent, perhaps, his subconscious way of preventing this human part from coming out. On the other hand, there is a real dignity there and a compact solidity. I wish, however, that Zukofsky had never met Pound. I think that maybe his direction would have been different.

Q. How so?

A. First, I had better admit that I believe that Pound’s critical writing—particularly the famous “Don’ts” essay—is an absolute foundation stone of contemporary American writing. But in his own work I think he’s been disastrous as a model, totally disastrous to younger writers. I’m thinking particularly of the *Cantos*, of its epic tone. What

was this based on, after all? On man's experiences? Certainly not. The experiences of men in the *Cantos* have only a highly specialized, idiosyncratic interest. On his view of the nature of man? Ridiculous! In Pound's view he is a boob or a crook or something equally bad. On his theoretical systems? His choices here are not even interesting. Why then an epic tone? Because of Pound's own personal need for supremacy, grandiosity. One has the feeling that everything was fed into his exciting lyrical machine to serve this purpose. It's not honest. He pretends that his material is epic when it is only a device to achieve grandiosity at the expense of the reader. All that pretense and double-dealing are nauseating to me. And irrelevant. People today are not heroic, and modern human nature is not epic. It's just human, and anything else is just playing games.

Q. And you believe that Zukofsky is grandiose?

A. No. Actually the long form of *A* is better suited to Louis than the shorter forms, since more of him comes through in it. But Pound has provided him with a large-scale model of unconnected fragments and has led him to believe that it's all right to make the most recondite, specialized references, as if it could be taken for granted that a literate reader would be familiar with them and have Pound's attitude towards them. If I'm reading a poem by Pound, why should I care what he read somewhere? It's of absolutely no interest to me.

Q. Don't you think he's able to make it interesting to you by putting it into a poem?

A. No, he's not. He pretends to know what he does not know and is contemptuous of all the boobs who don't understand his references and have not realized what is obvious to him; for example, that Confucius had all the answers. The final image that comes through in the *Cantos* is of a master of language and cadence, but the man who is speaking, the person, is preposterously grandiose. And a terrible example to others, who have a hard enough time keeping their own streak of grandiosity under control so as to be able to have an authentic encounter with a subject, without having a Lorelei chanting to them what they yearn to hear but know cannot be, that the road to greatness lies in grandiosity. But that's Pound's song, and once a person has been exposed to Pound's aura, it is difficult not to succumb. After all, who doesn't want to be great?

But there's a lot of this stuff around. Poetry gets judged, for

example, as great; greater than; not so great as; good but not great, etc. Also, from Pound's grandiosity it is only a short step to the bewitching notion—which, incidentally, Zukofsky is far too selective to fall for—that everything that comes into the mind is precious. The long poem thus becomes a necessity for some writers. Before they have learned how to write an authentic short poem, it is announced that they are at work on a long one—meaning they're on something really big. Which leads to an irrational, philistine system in which one had to feel apologetic about "Brightness falls from the air, / Queens have died young and fair" because it is only two lines long.

Q. Getting back to my original question, what kind of poetry did you hope to write?

A. Well, at first I was very much seduced by the elegance of language, the imaginative associations of words; I was involved in a language world—a little like the world of Wallace Stevens, who was an idol of mine during a certain period. But at the same time, another part of me did not get away from social reality. You'll find in the *Youthful Mockeries* section of *Amulet* a lot of scorn for what was going on in the social world. In my recent work I'm doing something different and for me very difficult, and that is to take something quite personal and turn it into poetry. After all, nobody is interested in Rakosi as a person; why should they be? It's a tremendous challenge, therefore, to see whether the person Rakosi and what is happening to him can be turned into poetry. Now *Americana* is different. In these poems I was fascinated by folklore and I was searching there for basic American types that have really influenced our thinking—and these types are in all of us in a way. I'm sorry I petered out on *Americana*; I was hoping to go on.

Q. I'd like to get back to the problem of an "imagined language world" in a moment, but in the meantime could you elaborate on what you were just saying about the *Americana* poems? Perhaps you could comment on *Americana I* [*Amulet*, p. 38], that short piece about a pioneer who is asked why he's taking his gun into Indian country, since "If your time has come, you'll die anyway," and replies, "I know that, but it may be the Indian's time."

A. Well, who was the American settler, what was he really like? It seemed to me the truth about the pioneer was not that he was romantic, but that he was practical. His reply is very primitive and shrewd.

This is my own personal concept of what the pioneer must have been like, not in the way he appears in American folklore, of course, where he's made heroic.

Q. I had the idea that the poem was simply based on a punch line. But you are actually saying that one should reflect on the speaker who has made the utterance, rather than on the utterance itself.

A. Well, I think so. Although it's true I tried to pack a lot into that last line.

Q. But to get back to the main body of your poetry, in "Shore Line" you wrote, "This is the raw data. / A mystery translates it / into feeling and perception; / then imagination; / finally the hard / inevitable quartz / figure of will / and language." It seems to me that this is an indication of how you view the poetic process in general. Wouldn't this passage be in accord with what you were saying about an imagined language world?

A. I think that's true, though it's not the whole thing. The first draft of what I want to write will be pretty much raw data that's been changed around. Then I keep changing it around some more, but it's still raw data. It hasn't been converted yet to a . . . I would say a mystery changes it. I really mean a mystery because I don't know what it is that makes the conversion possible. I only know when I haven't done it. What is it in a person that doesn't let him be until he has transformed an experience, certain feelings and observations that are related to each other and suddenly strike him as important subject-matter? I don't know the answer.

Q. Well, actually I had in mind the state of some of the perceptions and images in the finished poem. "The Lobster," for instance, seems to be presenting raw data, although if you look at it carefully, it's not raw data by any means: "Eastern Sea, 100 fathoms, / green sand, pebbles, / broken shells. / Off Suno Saki 60 fathoms, / gray sand, pebbles, / bubbles rising. / . . . The fishery vessel *Ion* / drops anchor here / collecting / plankton smears and fauna."

A. Well, there are a lot of details here, but they're certainly not just raw data, they add up to the sea, the mystery and coldness of the sea. By the way, this poem has been reprinted more than any other; for some reason people have liked it. I really don't know why; in a way, it's less Rakosi than almost any other of my poems because it doesn't

have people in it. What I was trying to project here is a depersonalized something which is the sea.

Q. What about the person of the speaker as he sees each of these items brought up from the bottom? Isn't the reader viewing this "raw material" through the eyes of a man located on the fishery vessel?

A. That's so, but what I was trying to do was to write a poem without the poet.

Q. Do you believe that's possible?

A. It's possible (perhaps only relatively), though I really don't enjoy doing it that way.

Q. The poem called "Time to Kill" seems to raise the same questions. It seems to be giving raw data, objective description—though, when you consider it, the observations are clearly those of a man with time to kill, someone who is bored, perhaps.

A. That's right, up to a point. This was a hot summer afternoon and you know how everything thickens and slows up when it's hot, so that one's perceptions of what's going on become slower and denser. Then along comes an old man into the scene, and I felt and tried to convey a bit of pathos there.

Q. But you would say then that there is a human subject, a perceiver?

A. Oh yes, it's very different from "The Lobster" in that respect. And "Time to Kill" was written recently, whereas "The Lobster" was written thirty years ago. I couldn't have written "Time to Kill" as a young man.

Q. Why not?

A. I wasn't related to reality in that way then.

Q. What do you mean?

A. A lifetime of involvement with people in social work came between these two periods. This might make me a poorer poet in some ways because I'm not so completely subsumed by language as I was then. I'm equally interested in subject-matter.

Q. You mentioned Stevens before. By my calculations your poem

“Homage to Stevens” must be an early one since it seems to be chiefly a linguistic exercise.

A. Yes, very early. If I had had more poems to put into *Amulet* I would have left that one out.

Q. Why so?

A. It doesn’t really say anything. I was just enjoying the pleasures of the images and the language. I don’t know what kind of experience Stevens started with, but if you take one of his poems and try to understand it as a man saying something, you’re lost. Its beauties are something utterly different. He’s killed all subject-matter.

Q. Would you say that Williams has done the same thing?

A. Oh no, Williams had a great respect for subject-matter.

Q. Well, *Paterson* is concerned with a human subject and a human world, but I had in mind some of the earlier poems that were simply formal presentations, matters of perception again.

A. Perhaps, but with Williams you always have the feeling that there’s a man there talking. With Stevens, you don’t get that feeling. He’s transformed himself into something wonderful and beautiful, but he’s not a man talking.

Q. But you must admit that some of your own subjects are not always immediately apparent. That poem called “The Gnat,” for example, or “The City, 1925.”

A. I had a little trouble with the gnat poem, too, when I reread it. The subject-matter really is winter—if you will imagine the rigors and the enormity of winter (the winter is especially enormous in Minnesota). And what is one person? He’s really a gnat. That’s me, a gnat in winter.

Q. Well, what are the “six rivers / and six wenchies / the twelve / victories” in the lines that end the poem?

A. I can’t answer that. I may have left the subject of winter in the middle of the poem and gone on to something else, in which case the two halves may not go together, I’m ashamed to say. Or the six rivers and six wenchies, which I would consider twelve victories anytime, anywhere, may have flashed through my mind because of the winter,

to triumph over it, as it were, and so on. In any case, I am not comfortable with the poem's ellipses.

Q. Don't you have another poem called "January of a Gnat," which repeats some of the images?

A. That is one of my first poems. It's all imagery, really. The subject is really my own imagination playing around with what winter felt like.

Q. What winter felt like from a highly imaginative point of view, not what it felt like literally.

A. Right, right.

Q. Does "The City, 1925" also have a subject, even though the images don't seem to have any logical connection between them?

A. Well, let me say this about it. I'm a young man of twenty-two, timid and lonely, and I come to New York from a small town and it's overwhelming—the immensity, the profusion, the infinite variety, the people. The poem is an effort to come to terms with this overwhelming impression. Since this is my first exposure, there are all kinds of objects to be described—objects which have no connection with each other. The connection is through my perception, through my receiving of them in their tremendous multiplicity.

Q. So once again the perceiver becomes the important element in the poem.

A. That's true. But intuitively I intended to keep these objects as intact as possible, to keep their integrity intact. So there is this element of an adherence to the integrity of the object that makes it different from mere description. At the same time, you are right. The real subject of the poem is not the objects themselves, interesting though they are, but what this young man is experiencing in their presence. What is important is that the integrity of both the subject and the object be kept. That is, I respect the external world—there is much in it that is beautiful if you look at it hard. I don't want to contaminate that; it has its own being; its own beauty and interest that should not be corrupted or distorted. But so does the poet have his own being.

Q. What would you say are some of the corrupting forces on perception of the actual world in its intrinsic beauty?

A. Well, here let me speak as a psychologist. There's the strongest

kind of pull in a poet against subject-matter—in fact, against writing a poem at all. No psychologist understood this as well as Otto Rank. He called this force the counter-will. This force is always around when the urge to write is felt, and is a match for it, and often more than a match. The fine hand of this counter-devil is evident, of course, in a writer's procrastination, but also operates behind the scenes in other more subtle and devious ways whenever one is evading subject-matter, by being rhetorical or elliptical, for example. On the surface this looks innocent, as if it were just a literary matter, but if the writer himself thinks so, it just means that its protective purpose has been achieved and he has been conned by his counter-devil. In the process, he may make something as good, or even better, but the fact remains that he did not retain the integrity of his original impulse, he had to appease or deceive his counter-will with a substitute. You can see this counter-devil is a very live fellow to me.

Q. What about the matter of abstraction? This brings us back to Pound's "A Few Don'ts."

A. Abstraction, of course, is the most common deadly offender. When you write about something as though it were a principle or a concept or a generalization, you have in that moment evaded it, its specificity, its earthly life. You are talking about something else. Really a different order of reality.

Q. Let me see if I understand you. You seem to be saying here that there are two kinds of corruption that are at the extreme of one another. One is a complete evasion of the subject by the use of formal devices in the poem, and the other is an excessively rational apprehension of the subject, so that the subject is transformed into the poet's conceptions about it rather than presented in its so-called inherent being.

A. If you change the word "conceptions" to "generalizations," you're right. It's extremely difficult to present the subject, the object that has been the cause of your experience, in its integrity—and you, the por-trayer of it, in your full integrity.

Q. Actually, it is precisely this kind of approach that might be called "objectivist." Does this correspond to your idea of what the term really means?

A. I think so. It was the reason I thought the term was pretty good

originally, when Zukofsky thought it up. One way to see what it is is to see what it is not—how objectivism differs from imagism or symbolism, for example. You might think for a moment that, after all, objectivism is a form of imagism or naturalism. But imagism as I recall—and I haven't read any imagist poems in thirty years—was a reaction to the period immediately preceding, against literary affectations. So the imagists set out to do what the French impressionists in painting did: go out into the open and look, see what you see, and put it down without affectation of the then dominant literary influences. And that's as much as they did, but it wasn't complete. It was only the first step in a poetic process. That's why imagism is not altogether satisfying; the person of the poet is not sufficiently present.

Now symbolism, of course, is more in contrast with objectivism. It seems to me that the subject of symbolism is a poetic state of feeling and its aim is to reproduce it. It really didn't matter much what you started with—whether it was a flower or the moon. All the poet was concerned with was his own feeling. And for that subject, symbolism is suitable, but it's a very narrow subject.

Q. A state of feeling that was far removed from the object itself?

A. Simply his own state of feeling. He didn't care about the moon *really*, or about a flower, the real character of the flower.

Q. The radical difference then is between a state of feeling *per se* and one resulting from a direct perception of the object.

A. Let me put it this way. This was a generalized state of feeling that the poet carried around with him. An object was simply an occasion for him to project this feeling.

Q. This feeling that the symbolist possessed—his approach to reality—was in a sense *a priori* . . .

A. Absolutely.

Q. . . . whereas the objectivist has an *a posteriori* approach. He let his feelings depend upon the object and was faithful to the object.

A. Right. Now take my poem "To a Young Girl." The girl is not an abstraction; she remains real all the way through the poem. She's not the epitome of a young girl, she is not a beautiful ideal of a young girl, she is a real young girl. Now she becomes subjective in the sense that I, or the speaker, carry on a certain inner dialogue about her, but

that's my business, that's my reality which I project into the poem. But the girl is a real person. I respect her reality.

Q. This gets us back to "Shore Line," doesn't it? You begin with the raw data and then, being faithful to it, you transform it into perception and feeling and then into something imaginative.

A. I think so. I didn't realize when I wrote those lines that they were such a true expression of what goes on in me and of my view of poetry, objectivist poetry. But that's true.

Q. "To a Young Girl," then, while being based on an external object, really describes something that is going on in the mind of the poet; he's imagining what the girl herself might be thinking and he carries on an imaginary dialogue with her. It seemed to me that the point of the poem was the liveliness, to say the least, of the old man's thoughts and feelings.

A. Yes.

Q. In fact I was reminded of Humbert Humbert and *Lolita*. The nymphet turns out to be partly a creature of an old man's imagination.

A. I agree, I agree. You know, speaking of fidelity to the object, something else just occurred to me. *Amulet* was reviewed in a new British journal called the *Grosseteste Review* by a young poet who found a similarity between me and a young Czech poet named Holub. Holub is a physician and he's reported to have said that he was influenced by Williams, whom he read in translation. I have Holub's book at home and it's true that there are similarities. It seemed to me that maybe one reason Williams, Holub, and I have something in common is that none of us has been a professional poet nor an academic person; we've all had similar professions and perhaps our experience in them has led to a similarity in our poetry. Williams always had a feeling of respect for the object. Actually, as a pediatrician, his work was as much psychological—establishing a rapport with mothers and children, being reassuring and understanding—as it was medical. And this is true for the social worker. I don't know which medical specialty Holub was in, but he may also have had this kind of experience. Williams, of course, never stopped writing, as I did; I suspect his first response to experience may have been like mine, but that he was more in the habit of transforming it into literary material.

Q. An interesting idea. So you feel that your poetry is closest to that of Williams?

A. Well, no. I would say the one who is closest to me is Charles Reznikoff.

Q. From what you've been saying, I can see what you mean.

A. I think that Reznikoff comes through in his earlier poems as a thoroughly compassionate man. He comes through as a person. When he's observing something, you're inside him.

Q. Your *Americana* poems seem reminiscent of some of the things he was doing in *Testimony*.

A. I was fascinated with that book. But what he was saying there is that the raw data can speak for itself. It was what happened, what was in the law books and court records, and it's poetry.

Q. So he's looking at reality from his own professional viewpoint, as a lawyer.

A. Not exactly. He's simply recording it with the homely specificity and phraseology of legal language in the way it would be done in a good court record. That book did not get good reviews, as I recall. I think the critics said he hadn't done enough with the material. But my first reaction when I read it was that maybe Reznikoff is right. Maybe the material can speak for itself. But my assumptions in the *Americana* poems are different. I don't assume there that the raw data is the poetry. One thing that is similar though is that Reznikoff seems to have been fascinated with legal language and let it stand that way. In *Americana* I was fascinated with the unique flow of colloquial language, and I kept it that way.

Q. Would you call Reznikoff an objectivist?

A. Yes. I would think he goes about writing a poem pretty much as I do. Not so much in *Testimony* as in the earlier poems. Years ago Zukofsky told me that I must get together with Reznikoff because we had a lot in common. We've never met, though.

Q. Did you ever meet George Oppen?

A. No. But I respect his poetry. It can come through with brilliant

perceptions of reality, in which the self is interesting, as well as the object. But I can't warm up to it. It's stripped down too much.

Q. I wonder whether I might change the subject completely now and ask you a personal question. What made you decide to start writing poetry again after a lapse of over two decades?

A. Well, that's a very good story. I got a letter one day that had gone the rounds of a number of different cities, before it finally reached me, from a young Englishman named Andrew Crozier. He said that he had run across my name in an article by Rexroth, had looked up my work in magazines, and copied every single poem I had written. He had made a bibliography and wanted to know whether I had written any more. Well, the thought that somebody his age could care that much for my work really touched me; after all, there were two generations between us. And that's what started me.

There's an amusing bit to that letter. You know my legal name is Callman Rawley, not Carl Rakosi, and Crozier had a great deal of trouble tracking me down. Fortunately he was not discouraged by a letter from my publisher saying that he doubted if I was alive and that he had heard that I may have been a secret agent for the Comintern and died behind the Iron Curtain. However, this was only a rumor and Crozier must not breathe a word of this to anyone! I can guess where this rumor might have come from. My publisher must have gotten to someone who knew my old friend, Kenneth Fearing. Fearing and I had been roommates at the University. This is just the kind of prank he would play. I can hear him laughing like hell over it.

Q. Well, at least the letter reached you and that was fortunate. One final question. Did you revise any of the earlier poems that were included in *Amulet*?

A. Actually I made a lot of changes in the magazine versions I incorporated into my first book, *Selected Poems*, in 1941. Zukofsky said I had ruined some of them. He was right. I cut out too much. In *Amulet* I changed some of them back closer to the original, and others forward, as it were, to the 1960's. But I'm never satisfied. I could keep rewriting them all my life. It's a good way to get nowhere, because a person is constantly changing, and what satisfies him one day is bound to dissatisfy him the next. Unless one's critical judgment has improved, therefore—and there is no reason for that to happen after a certain age—the third version is apt to be as good as the fourth, or

even better, because it's closer to the original stimulus. But it's no use telling myself that. I can't keep hands off. There's a dunderhead in me somewhere that persists in believing that a fresh perception of a poem is more right than the old. The oaf refuses to face up to the fact that every new occasion is a new situation and has to have a new poem. What a battle I'd have with my counter-will if I ever adhered to that!

April 4, 1968