

William Carlos Williams

Born 1883 in Rutherford, New Jersey. Died 1963. Of the first generation of dominant American moderns, he was the most open to the full range of new forms & possibilities: to the actual scope of what had to be done. Along with the Pound association—going back to his student days at the University of Pennsylvania—he engaged directly during the First World War with such as the Others group & the N. Y. Dadaists, & wrote of that time: “There had been a break somewhere: we were streaming through, each thinking his own thoughts, driving his own designs toward his self’s objectives. Whether the Armory Show in painting did it or whether that also was no more than a facet—the poetic line, the way the image was to lie on the page was our immediate concern. For myself all that implied in the materials, respecting the place I knew best, was finding a local assertion—to my everlasting relief.” With Robert McAlmon in the early 1920s he co-edited *Contact* & was later an adviser to Charles Henri Ford’s *Blues*, Richard Johns’ *Pagany*, &, most significantly, the “Objectivists” group (Zukofsky, Reznikoff, Oppen, *et al.*). His ongoing concerns were with the relation of poetry to the given state of the language & to the details & particulars of experience: the materials *de facto* through which the imagination could act. In the 1950s the pattern of his sympathies—his exploration of a “new measure” & the “poem as a field of action,” along with the need to transform the idea of tradition & the social ground of poetry—brought his work to the center of a number of poetic “movements”: projectivists, Beats, etc. The present selection focuses on the early 1920s, when Williams was working on the “improvisations” & non-sequential arrangements of *Kora in Hell* & *Spring and All* (below), with its interplay of prose & verse, leading in effect to the concept & structure of *Paterson*, the complex long poem whose appearance was being eagerly awaited by the end of the

Second World War. His other major books between 1917 & 1945 were *Al Que Quiere* (1917), *Sour Grapes* (1921), *Collected Poems* (1934), & *The Wedge* (1944)—gathered 1950/51 in the *Collected Earlier Poems* & the *Collected Later Poems*—plus novels, plays, short stories, & *In the American Grain*, a germinal work toward the redefinition of the American past.

From SPRING AND ALL

IX

What about all this writing ?

O " Kiki "

O Miss Margaret Jarvis

The backhandspring

I : clean

clean

clean : yes.. New York

Wrigley's, appendicitis, John Marin :

skyscraper soup —

Either that or a bullet !

Once

anything might have happened

You lay relaxed on my knees —

the starry night

spread out warm and blind

above the hospital —

Pah !

It is unclean

which is not straight to the mark —

In my life the furniture eats me

Mina Loy

Born 1883 in England. Died 1966 in Aspen, Colorado. Her work started to appear circa 1913, & by 1918, Pound (probably unaware she was an Englishwoman) reviewed her & Marianne Moore as "a distinctively national product . . . something which could not have come out of any other country," & which, he said, typified the process he called *logopoeia* or "poetry that is akin to nothing but language, which is a dance of the intelligence among words and ideas and modification of ideas and characters." His further description of it, "the utterance of clever people in despair, or hovering upon the brink of that precipice," now seems more true of Loy than Moore; & what he fails to observe on Loy's side is that her work by 1918 had taken on a largeness of theme & an energy of sound & image that few in her generation could match. By then too, or soon thereafter, she was into a private mythology, *Anglo-Mongrels & the Rose*, that the present editor finds comparable to, & probably not chronologically behind, Pound's early *Cantos* & Eliot's *Waste Land*. But the parts ended up scattered like the limbs of Osiris, & by the time a few fragments turned up under other titles in Jargon Press' expanded reprint of her selected poems, *Lunar Baedeker* (1958), none of the three poets introducing the book (William Carlos Williams, Kenneth Rexroth & Denise Levertov) could recall the large work from which they came. So, if anyone wants to take the hint & read through *Rogue*, *Broom*, *The Little Review*, *Others*, *Contact*, etc., they may be able to piece together one of the lost master-poems of the 20th century.



Gertrude Stein

Born 1874 in Allegheny, Pennsylvania. Died 1946. Her own appraisal of her work ("the most serious thinking about the nature of literature in the 20th century has been done by a woman") seems reasonable enough compared to the neglect of that work, but particularly the poetry, in established literary circles. She came early to a root investigation of language & form ("going systematically to work smashing every connotation that words ever had, in order to get them back clean"—W. C. W.) & to a poetry that brought "cubism" into language (here as an altered concept of time, the "continuous present") & otherwise set the stage for much that was to follow. Her materials were simple enough to be easily misunderstood, & her declared intention was to "work in the excitedness of pure being . . . To get back that intensity into the language." She could produce work that was literally abstract, the end of a process of experiment by subtraction; or, as she would write later when looking back at *Tender Buttons*: "It was my first conscious struggle with the problem of correlating sight, sound and sense, and eliminating rhythm—now I am trying grammar and eliminating sight and sound" (*Transition* No. 14, Fall, 1928). And it was, at the same time, a struggle to reorder thought & to explore what her teacher, William James, called "other forms of consciousness"—that process recognized in 1913 by Mabel Dodge, who wrote in the special issue of Stieglitz's *Camera Work*: "Nearly every thinking person nowadays is in revolt against something, because the craving of the individual is for further consciousness and because consciousness is expanding and is bursting through the moulds that have held it up to now. And so let every man whose private truth is too great for his existing conditions pause before he turn away from Picasso's painting or from Gertrude Stein's writing, for their case is his case." Only over the last few years has this become clear again, with the re-

issuing (in a poetry context) of certain key works: *Geography & Plays, As a Wife Has a Cow, & Matisse, Picasso & Gertrude Stein* by Something Else Press, & *How Writing Is Written & Primer for the Gradual Understanding of Gertrude Stein* by Black Sparrow. Along with the nearly unavailable Yale series (*Bee Time Vine, Alphabets & Birthdays, Painted Lace, & Stanzas in Meditation*) & other collections that largely draw on her prose work, these form an extraordinary cross-section from an endlessly variable series of experiments in poesis & meditation.



Now to come back to how I know what I know about poetry.

I was writing The Making of Americans, I was completely obsessed by the inner life of everything including generations of everybody's living and I was writing prose, prose that had to do with the balancing the inner balancing of everything. I have already told you all about that.

And then, something happened and I began to discover the names of things, that is not discover the names but discover the things the things to see the things to look at and in so doing I had of course to name them not to give them new names but to see that I could find out how to know that they were there by their names or by replacing their names. And how was I to do so. They had their names and naturally I called them by the names they had and in doing so having begun looking at them I called them by their names with passion and that made poetry, I did not mean it to make poetry but it did, it made the Tender Buttons, and the Tender Buttons was very good poetry it made a lot more poetry, and I will now more and more tell about that and how it happened.

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From TENDER BUTTONS

A DOG

A little monkey goes like a donkey that means to say that means to say that more sighs last goes. Leave with it. A little monkey goes like a donkey.

Louis Zukofsky

Born 1904 in New York City. "Specifically, a writer of music," he quotes in a "prose" section of *29 Songs*, & that concern is everywhere in his work, which seems now more innovative of forms & the hidden resources of language's soundings than that of any but a handful of American moderns. But the music, if the term holds, is as much of eyes as ear, the consequence of "the kind of intelligence Zukofsky has—seeing & hearing words in the world as the specific possibilities they contain" (R. Creeley). First published in Pound's *Exile* (later in *Dial*, *Blues*, *Pagany*, *Criterion*, etc.), he coined the word "objectivists" (his quotes), to fit an issue of younger poets he was assembling for *Poetry* (1931); later extending it to *An "Objectivists" Anthology* (1932) & to George & Mary Oppen's *To Publishers*, renamed *The Objectivist Press*. Not a polarization into object/subject but a dialectic, the objectivist "principle" derives from a metaphor of vision ("rays of the objective brought to a focus," as in optics) & from earlier assumptions (mainly Pound's) about image & vortex. Thus, to catch Zukofsky in quotes about it then & later:

- (1) "thinking with the things as they exist"
- or (2) "(as) Shakespeare's text thruout favors the clear physical eye against the erring brain"
- or (3) "the direction of historic & contemporary particulars."

The major collections of Zukofsky's work are *All: The Collected Short Poems 1923-58* & *All* (ditto) *1956-1964*, & two large works, *A* (a long "poem of a life," begun in 1927, most of the projected 24 "movements" now in print) & *Bottom: On Shakespeare* (in prose, "a long poem on a theme for the variety of its recurrences"). His translations from Catullus (1969)—starting from the sound & moving out—break new ground for translation-as-composition & are, like

his musical *Autobiography* (1970), a collaboration with his wife, Celia. His writings on poetry, aside from the above, are in *Prepositions: Collected Critical Essays* (1968) & *A Test of Poetry* (1964).



*The melody, the rest are accessory—
... my one voice; my other ...
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.*

TWO SONGS

It's a gay li - ife
There's naw - - - thing
lak po - - - ee try
it's a delicacy
for a horse:

Dere's na - - - thing
lak pea- nut-brittle
it's a delicacy
for the molars.

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No One Inn

P.S. i.e. almost dreamt
the face against the door
a pastel's a boy's