

## *His Character Is Durity*

On Carl Rakosi

Writing in the *Guardian* in September 2002, Jonathan Freedland suggested that “The word of the hour is empire. As the United States marches to war, no other label seems to capture the scope of American power or the scale of its ambition”. The scale of American ambition has never been easy to measure, but Carl Rakosi, in a career spanning eight decades, is a poet whose work has often pondered this problem. Following the acceptance of a joint American and British resolution, United Nations weapons inspectors arrived in Baghdad to re-commence the search for weapons of mass destruction in November 2002. In the same month, the *London Review of Books* published two poems by Rakosi, one of which (“Americana”) ended with the following image:

And a band is blaring away  
As if all hell

had broken loose  
under the eye  
of Sousa himself

and all is well  
in this fair land.

*ba! ba!*

Rakosi is not the first American poet to question the remarkable capacity for ignoring the fact that all is not well in the Land of Stars and Stripes that sometimes afflicts its leaders. Appearing when it did, however, whether it was intended to or not, “Americana” presented one of the most succinct and insightful

observations about the unfolding situation in Iraq at the time: “all hell” had not quite “broken loose”, but it was only a matter of months before it would.

Born in Berlin in 1903, the son of “highly acclimatized” Hungarian parents, Rakosi emigrated to the United States in 1910. Having studied medicine and law at the Universities of Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, and Texas in the 1920s, he went on to work at a wide range of jobs, including periods as a social worker and, from 1945 to 1968, as executive director of the Jewish Family and Children’s Service in Minneapolis, where he also worked as a psychotherapist from 1958 to 1968. Between 1941 and the publication of *Amulet* in 1967, Rakosi did not publish any poetry; he didn’t even write it, as he explained in an interview in 2002:

It didn’t seem possible to make a living, have a family too, which I was starting to have, and to write. When I tried it, it kept me up all night. You can do that two or three nights, but you can’t do it as a regular thing. So I stopped. For twenty-seven years.

Re-discovered Andrew Crozier in the 1960s, at a time when he believed he was “dead to the world”, *Amulet* was subsequently dedicated both to the poet’s family and to Crozier “who wrote the letter/ which started me writing again”. Since then, Rakosi has produced a remarkable body of work, including: *Ere-VOICE* (1971), *Ex Cranium*, *Night* (1975), *My Experience in Parnassus* (1977), *Droles de Journal* (1981), *Spiritus I* (1983), *The Beasts* (1994), *The Earth Suite* (1997), as well as a volume of *Collected Prose* (1983). In 1999 Nicholas Johnson’s etruscan books published *The Old Poet’s Tale*, the first volume of a projected *Collected Works*.

Overlooked by the editors of many earlier anthologies, perhaps understandably given his long silence, a selection of Rakosi’s work was included in Andrew McAllister’s *The Objectivists* in 1996. Rakosi’s particular understanding of the “Objectivist” designation of his work, however, is worth exploring, and much further than can be attempted here. It is the case that a group of his poems opened the February 1931 Objectivist issue of Harriet Monroe’s journal *Poetry*, and that he appeared in *An “Objectivists” Anthology* which was edited by Louis Zukofsky and published in 1932. Nevertheless, Rakosi has said that, “Among the Objectivists

only [Charles] Reznikoff and I can be said to have any affinities". Moreover, he has pressed for a wider appreciation of it as a way of describing the work of poetry in general, and not just with regard to the narrow "Objectivist" group as it has been variously determined since the 1930s:

Louis [Zukofsky] tried to define Objectivist but couldn't quite do it. He was better at saying what it was not: "Fake, mere word-mongering, the lack of a process of words acting on particulars show up as rot in all times". Although he scorned the term, feeling that he had been forced by Harriet Monroe... to give a name to the contributors he had assembled so as to make it look like a movement, I found it useful for my own work. It conveyed a meaning which was, in fact, my objective: to present objects in their most essential reality and to make of each poem an object, meaning by this the opposite of vagueness, loose bowels and streaming, sometimes screaming consciousness.

Whatever debates have taken place before or since about the meaning of "Objectivism" as a movement or a concept, and however long they will continue, Rakosi has always maintained his individuality by insisting on the term's rightness only insofar as it relates to his own work and its almost scientific, but rarely dispassionate attention to detail.

Three random examples from *The Old Poet's Tale* demonstrate the way that Rakosi's poetry may be said to exemplify "the opposite of vagueness" or "screaming consciousness" in its investigations of things, animals and human beings (from "Nasturtium", "Poem" and "In a Warm Bath" respectively):

a flower of a name!  
An exquisite self

rooted in the God  
in the earth

like man.

.....

The ants came  
to investigate  
the dead  
bull snake,

nibbled  
at the viscera  
and hurried off  
with full mouths  
waving wild  
antennæ

.....

Buddha is not more strange  
and impersonal  
than you, o belly  
waiting for the doctor's probe,  
or you, phallus  
wrinkled as an old crocodile  
in a salt marsh.

Delighting in the particular, Rakosi has always resisted the kind of overt social didacticism that is present in Reznikoff's work, for example, despite his declared affinities with the poet who created one of the most important poetic critiques of American society as it entered its second century (*Testimony*). This is not to say that Rakosi's poetry is untroubled by social and political affairs. On the contrary, it is a body of work that consistently engages the contexts of its composition, and (as Michael Heller has argued of the Objectivists in general), it participates in the "identification and testing of the century's spectres of promise or doom" with "a kind of honorable steadfastness of perception and vision".

It is precisely this connection between "perception" and "vision" in Rakosi that enables the poet of minute observation, as illustrated above, to become the poet whose work passes through what he has termed "the eye of abstraction" in "Meditation XI" to achieve genuine social and political significance. "The poet lives for a symbol", he has written, "but the ordinary citizen is in constant danger of dying for one, without ever knowing what it is". Rakosi is constantly aware of the dichotomy that sometimes separates poets from "ordinary" citizens, and his poetry reflects with great care his career-long desire to mend the rift between them.

In *The Pound Era* Hugh Kenner argues that the Objectivists' function was to create a poetry of "no myths": as Muriel Rukeyser puts it in "The Poem as Mask": "No more masks! No more mythologies!" Equally, Rakosi's poetry refuses to be disengaged

from the real by what Eavan Boland (influenced, perhaps, by Rukeyser) has called “the Noise of Myth”. Despite an early inclination towards the poetry of Wallace Stevens, for example, Rakosi has said that “There’s not much sense of the real world” in the work of *Harmonium*. Critics (and poets) have debated the point, but for Rakosi, as he put it in “Homage to Wallace Stevens”, to be an advocate of Stevens is to enter

the fellowship  
which turns an apricot liqueur  
and absinthe into innocence,  
the bottles into happy unities  
among the pie-eyed sobbing hooligans.

In a poem written in his nineties, “Short Meditation”, Rakosi asks whether he must now “give up/ paradoxes and/ crossed signals// and fish for poignancy/ in a safe persona?” Rakosi has never invented a “safe persona” or bought into the kinds of myths that sometimes usurp art, nor has he allowed his sense of the world to be elbowed out of his poetry, as is sometimes the case in Stevens’ writing.

In what may be regarded as one of the most compelling, if oblique, descriptions of lyric agency ever attempted in verse, “How to Be with a Rock”, Rakosi has written that:

The explicit ends here.  
Outer is inner.  
It is all manifest.  
Its character is durity.  
There lies its charisma.

Taking us with him into the twenty-first century Carl Rakosi is a poet of whom it might be said, his “character is durity”. “Durity”: meaning “hardness”, signifying both his resilience as a poet—returning in 1967 after twenty-seven years of silence to produce more than three decade’s worth of work that will endure—and in terms of the toughness with which he has faced, and continues to face, the world around him, bowing neither to the vicissitudes of ideology or age. “Durity” also describes the robustness of his poetry, which is as relevant today as it was in the 1960s, as fresh as when it first started to appear in the little magazines of the 1920s.

What follows, then, is neither a re-appraisal of Rakosi’s work nor an introduction, necessarily, although he will hopefully gain

new readers from this feature. Neither is it, as one of the contributors suggested it might become, an “Objectivist *omnium gatherum*”. Primarily, this small gathering of essays, poems and reflections on Rakosi and two of his close contemporaries (Lorine Niedecker and George Oppen) is meant to celebrate his poetry and, of course, his one hundredth birthday. Contributions are included by Andrew Crozier, Michael Heller, and Nicholas Johnson, each of whom has played a major role in increasing awareness of Rakosi’s work over the past few decades. Also included are responses to Rakosi’s poetry and prose by Ron Callan and Kit Fryatt, as well as poems presented especially for the occasion by David Miller and Maurice Scully. Caitríona O’Reilly and David Wheatley have written pieces on Niedecker and Oppen, whose *Collected Works* and *New Collected Poems* (respectively) have recently appeared. The project of collecting Rakosi’s poems continues, but it is too early to expect his “complete” works; the man is still very much alive and writing and, as he put it in an online interview in 2002: “One of the absolute myths about old age is that one loses one’s creative potentialities”. “What can be compared to/ the living eye?” he asks in “Meditation IX”, to which one replies with gratitude and respect: “the living eye” of this centenarian’s poetry.