

Louis Zukofsky. *The Writing of Guillaume Apollinaire / Le Style Apollinaire*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2004. 243p.

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The Writing of Guillaume Apollinaire is a rather unusual piece of “critical” work from the Wesleyan Press. This essay is the first book-length work published and fully endorsed by Louis Zukofsky, an American poet, born in New York in 1904 from Orthodox Jewish parents who emigrated from Northeastern Europe at the end of the nineteenth century. Zukofsky, who received his Master degree from Columbia University and worked most of his life as a teacher, is mostly known for his experimental poetical and critical writing. His poems began to appear in reviews in the late twenties. Their complex and fragmented composition denotes an early devotion to Ezra Pound’s *Cantos*.

Zukofsky’s *Writing of Guillaume Apollinaire* never appeared in its totality in the original version. Translated into French by his friend René Taupin, a critic and teacher, the text was published in 1934 under the title *Le style Apollinaire*. Most of the copies of the original edition disappeared in a fire. Twenty-six years after Zukofsky’s passing and seventy years after its first publication, the Wesleyan Press has reprinted for the first time the work in its original idiom or, should I say, idioms, since Zukofsky’s manuscript combines his English prose and an abundance of quotations from Apollinaire in French. Facing a language duality, certainly difficult for non-bilingual American readers, the Wesleyan Press has created an editorial “tour de force” by printing on alternate pages two versions of the work. The original dual language manuscript is reproduced on the right-hand pages; the left-hand pages give the respective translations. Zukofsky’s comments appear in their original French translation by René Taupin, while Apollinaire’s quotations are translated into English by Sasha Watson. The mirrored composition pays homage to these two poets known for the modernism of their writing; however, the language crisscrossing forces the reader through some rather laborious visual gymnastics.

The complex structure of Zukofsky’s text certainly contributes to the presence of some initial explanations meant to pave the way for the reader. The essay is thus preceded by a brief foreword in French by poet Jean Daive: “Louis Zukofsky et le style autobiographique” and a substantial introduction in English by Serge Gavronsky: “Guillaume Apollinaire subsumed under Zukofsky’s Gaze: ‘... listening receptively...’” They both attempt to clarify, if not justify, the reason for a study on Apollinaire by Zukofsky, therefore giving a necessity to a work whose premises remain vague, and which, according to some, is no more than an accidental collaboration fulfilling an academic obligation for Taupin while bringing financial advantages for Zukofsky.

Both Gavronsky and Daive characterize the essay as primarily driven by empathy. Zukofsky, as an avant-garde poet from Jewish descent, saw his own reflection in the innovative work of the French poet who coined the word “surrealism” and who demonstrated a strong interest for Judaic culture.

Divided in three chapters—“There Is...” (“Il Y A”), “The Poet Resurrected” (“Le Poète ressuscité”), “And CO.” (“& Cie”)—*The Writing of Guillaume Apollinaire* starts with notations and statements of biographical nature and focuses more on Apollinaire’s aesthetic towards the end. Nonetheless, Zukofsky’s comments do not follow a clear organization or progression. As illustrated by his few words of preface titled “The Stroller,” the book is an erratic promenade through Apollinaire’s verses and prose. Well before a time when the frontiers between theory and fiction have been put into question, the mixture of critical analyses and poetical pondering gives this essay a postmodern aspect. If the reader does not find a synthesis of Apollinaire’s writing, he will find a good number of quotations. According to Roland Barthes, writing is not an act of creation but rather a process of reorganization. Under this assumption, the mere fact of quoting is already an act of transformation. Zukofsky’s composition embodies this statement. In the first and third chapter, Apollinaire’s words are inextricably mixed with Zukofsky’s prose, their collusion often reaching a point of (con)fusion. As for the second chapter, it consists solely of a collage of various quotations more or less arranged, extracted from Apollinaire’s poetical and critical work. In the end, *The Writing of Guillaume Apollinaire* seems to be more a rewriting of Apollinaire. This process is typical of Zukofsky’s writing. It recalls the form of his essay *Henry Adams: A Criticism in Autobiography*, generously threaded with extracts from Adams’ works.

The complex and peculiar composition of this forgotten essay is undeniably a precious testimony on modernism. Scholars and students whose research involves very contemporary writing will certainly be fascinated by a 1934 manuscript which is a paradigm of a literary process coined by Julia Kristeva in 1966 as “intertextuality.” However, no matter how interesting and innovative the structure is, the constant interlocking of the two languages and the two authors, redoubled by their translation, is, in the long run, extremely arduous. Zukofsky’s gaze on Apollinaire soon turns into a maze and readers should be prepared for an extremely challenging reading. ✱