

The Poetry of Carl Rakosi

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Having returned to poetry in 1965 after a twenty-five year silence, Carl Rakosi continues to enjoy a chiefly avant-garde reputation. Associating him with the so-called Objectivist Group of the thirties, which included Louis Zukofsky, George Oppen and Charles Reznikoff, *New Directions* brought out a collection of his work, *Amulet*, in 1967, and his poetry has continued to appear in various little magazines. Like the other members of the group, which was held together more by financial necessity than by a common program, Rakosi has reluctantly accepted the Objectivist label. And, also like the others, he has done so because he has been able to interpret the term to suit his own aesthetic inclinations:

It conveyed a meaning [he wrote] 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, obviously, the opposite of a subject; the opposite, that is, of all forms of personal vagueness; of loose bowels and streaming, sometimes screaming, consciousness.¹

The subject, however, was not to be eliminated; the poet made the poem into an object by “feeling the experience sincerely, by discriminating particularity, by honesty and intelligence, by imagination and craftsmanship.”

What makes these distinctions more than clichés is that they are part of a concern that gives shape to the broken halves of Rakosi’s career. Looking back on his early work, Rakosi remarked that, for the most part, he had been “seduced by the elegance of language.” After the hiatus he had had, as he relates, “a lifetime involvement with people in social work.”² This experience made him more concerned with “subject-matter,” defined, for the most part, as personal feelings about human relations. Thus the need Rakosi expressed to turn subjective experience into an “objective” poem—and therefore avoid sentimentality or “loose bowels”—was an immediate and deeply-felt one. Sometimes he was successful, sometimes not.

When Rakosi said that in his early poems he was seduced by the elegance of language (or “subsumed by language”), he was in a sense passing adverse judgment. He acknowledged that he had been strongly influenced by Wallace Stevens and argued that Stevens had “killed all subject-matter”: “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.” In terms of this criterion, the “elegant” rhetorical universe of the early work clearly occupies another dimension, but Rakosi’s remarks, on himself as well as on Stevens, are open to question.

To begin with, the two poems, "Salons" and the "Sittingroom by Patinka," which were reprinted in *Amulet* as "Homage to Wallace Stevens," are actually parodies, not true imitations.³ "Salons" appears to be a take-off on "Peter Quince" and "Sittingroom by Patinka" on "Sunday Morning." Furthermore, they not only parody Stevens' diction and imagery but they satirize an effete world:

I found Miss Levi in a plush repose,
counting the curves pitched in her portly mirrors
by seven bored and pigmy globes.

Her floors
were tourmaline supporting topaz standards. ("Sittingroom")⁴

The rhetoric is Stevens' but the imagery and the irony recall Eliot. In any case Miss Levi is a fit companion for the dandy-esque Stevensian speaker who is describing her. "Carl, I feel/the musings of profuse dim meistersingers," she says, revealing a Stevensian sensibility of her own, and she goes on to say in imaginative meaninglessness,

"We mix with carbonates and corals
on pelagic passes where prawns sail
like passions.
Sea spiders hobble from my hair,
my eyes
shall twinkle into octagons of frost."

This is clearly the language of surreality and it is a style in which the young Rakosi took delight. Nonetheless, the early poems are usually something more than exercises: they present a lyric speaker whose elegance delimits his personality. The Rakosian poet works "in cut glass and majolica" and hears "the plectrum of the angels" ("Night Thoughts"). But essentially it is a music that cannot be transcribed into an intelligible measure, just as the speaker is obsessed by a world that has its existence chiefly in the imagination:

My thoughts kept dwelling on the littoral
where china clocks tick in the cold shells
and the weeds slide in the equinox.

"Fluteplayers from Finmarken" is a meaningfully obscure poem that effectively expresses the inexpressible psychic life of the artist. The Scandinavian fluteplayer encounters the polar sea of some afterworld,

this fungoid program
of the mind and matter
where the abstract signals
to the abstract
and the mind directs
a final white lens
on the spewing of the waterworm
and the wings of the midsea.

The speaker says, "It was not clear what I was after . . . /until the other flutes arrived," but it can never be clear to the reader.

And in a sense there really are no other flutes for the Fluteplayer, who must take his identity as the isolated man of imagination. Rakosi reveals as much in the late poem "Figures in an Ancient Ink," which begins by presenting unconnected, imaginative images of Jupiter, Hrothgar, and "Saracen physicians" and continues by saying that whatever their original significance,

. . . that is not the way
they speak to me.

I made them
but took away their speech
and gave them instead a precious
patina of ancient associations.
that is how they got their mystery
and speak to me.

The vision is entirely private, as the next lines make clear:

What, am I in love then
with my own images, and Onan
wrapped in their protective strangeness?
shrinking from what failure?

The question is perhaps answered, at least in part, in "The Heifer":

I am he who lost
his father's simple power
to touch and smell
untouched by philosophy . . .
the inexpugnable integrity
of a heifer licking its nose . . .
forever lost. . . .

The early sequence, "A Journey Away," which underwent much revision and rearrangement, is a partly-hallucinatory account of the failures of a young poet who reveals himself to be another Mauberley or Prufrock.⁵ The second section describes the typical problem with women of the effeminate aesthete:

I dreamed last night
that I was married.
I was scared, the woman
being very young, with green
stones in her garter.
She looked upon me wistfully
and said:
I was a taxi dancer
with a sweetheart on a fishing smack.
I perceive by these pains
that I am condemned to die.

Sea-kin,
we have broken away.
Our hearts are grounded
in the waterways.
Our butts foam
in the current like a keel.
We pray
that our wings may blaze
in the sterling course.

One version of this poem was entitled, banally, I fear, "Waiting for a Poem," but its concluding lines summoned up the whole vision of the poet's quest for articulation:

Sea-kin, I have broken away
My heart has risen like a bird
in the waterways and breaks into words.
May I have a true and easy course!

The final section casts the poet in the persona of a tired bullfighter who must daily face both bulls and "the gall irk/ of cafard and sceptic." Even in this masculine incarnation, he perhaps sees himself as only a performer for a fickle crowd. "Keep the whiskey from me," he says, in a touch characteristic of the later Rakosi. (The line was in fact added to the original.)

The arena, however, is not a natural scene for the poet with an hallucinatory sensibility. The strange vision of the first section, in which two dead travellers speak "discreetly" but impotently of "the next world," better reflects his inclinations:

The words were impressive and muted.
Suddenly the one preoccupied
with his obsolete luetic eyeball
made a meaningless aside
in keeping with the serious scene.⁶

Rakosi's early poems were not all hallucinatory, however; many of them are impressionistic renderings of objects and situations and show the influence of imagism. Still, it is often an imagism with a quirk of language. "The Gnat" begins conventionally enough:

Winter and wind,
the whole age
is an afternoon
around the house

But concludes esoterically:

anabasis
for edelweiss
six rivers
and six wenches

great day/for Patrick Henry/Junior High.” It is such confusion (“bitter-sweet discombobulations”) suffered by young women that “in a moment turn men into Pierrots.” The truth is, however, that the girl has probably suffered no discombobulation and that it is the speaker’s own imaginings that have turned him into a poet, just as, in part, they have turned the girl into a nymphet.

The effectiveness of “Young Girl” lies in the comic conceits of the speaker, but the younger Rakosi was no less effective in treating a similar theme through elegant language. Thus “Flora and the Ogre”:

Let her quince knees sag
and the toy arcs of the dew
and daisy
guide her mild feet,
her torso is no more to me
than the woodcut of a nun.

The speaker is, of course, self-deceived and after continuing to describe his surreal-sensual lady, he surrenders:

Will no briny thunderbrunt
or green chill
deliver me?

In involving the sensibilities of the speaker, “Young Girl” reflects Rakosi’s new demand for the “presence” of the poet in the poem, the appearance of a “man saying something.” Rakosi believed that his early poem “The Lobster,” which listed the dredgings, at various depths, of a fishing vessel and was intended to reflect the “coldness of the sea,” was devoid of the poet’s presence. Contrasted with this poem is a late work called “Time to Kill,” which, insofar as it presents a series of observations at a beach, seems at first glance to be of the same order as “The Lobster”:

A man and his dog.
What fun
chasing twigs
into the water!
Young girls bicycle by
in pairs and plaid shorts.

The poem continues with other descriptions and views, all apparently straightforward. But Rakosi saw in the poem a personal element missing in “The Lobster,” and in fact the title indicates the state of mind of the observer, a state that in a sense controls his perceptions. Rakosi explained that,

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 an old man comes along into the scene and I felt and tried to convey a bit of pathos there.

This poem, I think, represents the essence of Rakosi's later interpretation of objectivism: objects are not to be recorded in their cold, impersonal reality but in terms of perception involving ordinary emotions. The true subject of the poem is, then, not the objects observed but the observer, whose responses "humanize" the "Virgilian scene": "What fun/chasing twigs," "A wind so soft," "A gentle lake," "The sun . . . /lays/a healing pad," "The poor small/wood louse."

Rakosi's desire to write in a realistic and human idiom does not, however, always have results so fortunate as "Young Girl" or "Time to Kill." Many of the poems, frankly autobiographical in subject and declarative in style, lack "protective strangeness" and verge on the very sentimentality he abhors. Rakosi's attempt to "throw off the cloak of Onan" and to write a social poetry is apparent in his *Americana* sequence, which demonstrates an interest in folklore but is clearly the wrong channel for his abilities. He has written his protest poem on the war in Vietnam ("The Enemy") and a moving set of reflections on anti-semitism ("Four Characters and a Place in the Merchant of Venice"). But perhaps he sounds best when he is playing his native instrument:

[The Clarinet]

runs up
a water-
ladder quicker
than the soul
past gravity.
.
This small-
bored Ariel
a pipe
with elegant air-
holes to the mellow
lining of abstraction
has a gentle reed
on which I suck
and like to dream.

Footnotes

¹ "A Note on the 'Objectivists,'" *Stony Brook* 3/4, 1969, 36.

² Interview, *Contemporary Literature* X, 2 (Spring, 1969), 178-192. All subsequent citations of Rakosi's comments are from this source. Rakosi has lived much of his adult life in Minneapolis, where he has been director of a welfare agency. He retired in 1968.

³ "Salons," originally published in *Pogany* (Autumn, 1931), appears, untitled, as the first section of "Homage" in the final (*Amulet*) version. "Sittingroom by Patinka."

originally published in *The Little Review* (Spring, 1925), appears, untitled, as the second section.

⁴ Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations from the poetry are from the *Amulet* edition, v.s.

⁵ The poem originally appeared in *Hound and Horn* (July-September, 1932), with its sections following a different sequence from the "*Objectivists*" *Anthology* version (also 1932) reprinted in *Amulet*. Most of the sections appeared as separate, titled poems or parts of poems in *Selected Poems* (New Directions, 1941). *The Hound and Horn* versions also contained sections that later appeared as separate poems and were never reintegrated. The *Hound and Horn* version is the least effective since it seems to be merely a series of unrelated sections; the *Anthology* arrangement, despite the continued surreality of the style, suggests a unified experience.

⁶ Although this section (sixth in the original version) was entitled "A Bit of Hardy" in the *Selected Poems*, the tone and diction are clearly Rimbaudian. Actually, the whole poem, which begins, "The wayfarer met the passerby/in death's champaign of flowers./ As the lint blew through their skulls/they spoke discreetly of the next world," has the same rhetoric as Hart Crane's "Emblems of Conduct" (1925), itself adapted from a poem by Samuel Greenberg. Crane's poem concludes, "The wanderer later chose this spot of rest/Where marble clouds support the sea/ . . . Dolphins still played, arching the horizons,/But only to build memories of spiritual gates."
