

“Love moved to earth cannot agree / with death”: “A”-10

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“A”-10 has rarely found favor among readers of Zukofsky—its comparatively direct emotional expression and topicality seem at odds with Zukofsky’s usual indirection and restraint. Yet, if for the moment we lift the poem out of the larger context of “A”, “A”-10 has a claim as a major work among the 1930s era political and war poetry that of late has received so much boosting. The poem is a passionate yet formalized response to the traumatic world events being reported over the media, with a whole catalogue of disasters marshaled not only to give a sweeping depiction of contemporary history but to condemn the powers that be, both those committing the atrocities and those failing to stop them.

As Bruce Comens has pointed out, the structure of “A”-10 follows the set order of the Catholic Mass, so that after the introductory segment, Zukofsky marks the beginning of each analogous section with key words or phrases from the liturgical texts, as well as occasionally reworking other terms from the liturgy into the poem.¹ The two largest sections, the Gloria and the Credo, also take up the bulk of “A”-10, the first focusing on details of the actual fall of France which was literally unfolding as Zukofsky wrote the poem, while the Credo section takes a broader view of the entire sequence of fascist aggression over the course of the 1930s: the Spanish Civil War, Kristallnacht, the Munich Pact (118-119) and an entire catalogue of nations falling to the fascist powers in rigorous chronological order from the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in 1931 through the European nations overrun by the Germans in 1940 (116)—all culminating with reference to the Molotov-Rippentrop (Stalin-Hitler) Pact (121). At this point the movement abruptly shifts to a more fragmentary set of vignettes, analogous to the Sanctus, Benedictus and Angus Dei of the Mass when the Eucharist is reenacted. Beyond its organizational function, the echoes of the Mass suggest the poetic effort to ritualize the anger and pain of events, or even simply the struggle to cope with overwhelming disaster as Zukofsky offers an agonized prayer of support to the victims, the nameless refugees and children “massed” and attending Mass in the dangers of the open road (112). On the other hand, this shadow Mass obviously functions ironically as signifying the presumably guiding values of Western culture, which, as current events all too evidently show, have been systematically betrayed. Zukofsky mentions several times the current Pope’s collaboration with and blessing of the fascists (112, 116), but the larger picture painted by the poem is intended to portray a complete moral bankruptcy far beyond the specific betrayal of the Church leadership. Because of the central presence of Bach’s *St. Matthews Passion*, the motif of Christ’s suffering, sacrifice and resurrection shadow the early movements of “A”—in particular “A”-1 evokes Christ’s suffering and draws an analogy with contemporary society’s have-nots, which on both levels is ignored by the bourgeois audience that attends the performance of Bach’s work. The Mass itself, as the liturgy of the Eucharist, is intended to commemorate Christ’s passion and to bond with its significance by partaking of his body, which is in turn the spiritual body of the Church—again

¹ Bruce Comens, *Apocalypse and After: Modern Strategy and Postmodern Tactics in Pound, Williams, and Zukofsky* (1995) 153. See notes at Z-site for the precise identification of the “A”-10’s formal replication of the Mass, as well as relevant passages from the liturgy that Zukofsky works into the poem. On a number of occasions Zukofsky indicated that he had in mind J.S. Bach’s Mass in B minor, although there is no reference to Bach in the movement and the structure of the Mass was pre-determined.

we have the motif of resurrection through community and memory but here in a sardonic register. In “A”-10 the body of the West is torn asunder, and the poem’s structural adoption of the Mass only foregrounds the abysmal failure of its institutions to respond to the needs and desires of “the people.” If the poem is an effort to compose a prayer in response to events, its tenuousness is evident in the catalogue of disasters that tends to overwhelm our perception of the poem’s formal structure. By the end of the Credo section, which in fact offers no grounds for belief, Zukofsky is reduced to a child’s rhyme on the Rhino as a figure for fascist deprivations (120). This effectively expresses the poet’s despair over the possibility of a public language in any sense adequate to the sense of betrayal, cynicism and hopelessness of events—how in such circumstances can words have any moral bite beyond subjective assertions of outrage?

The concluding sections of the movement, which in terms of the Mass structure should be celebrating Communion, seem to dissolve rather irrelevantly into a number of brief disconnected vignettes, which might be taken as further evidence of the poet’s sense of futility and inarticulosity. However, the very abruptness of the shift from the large view of the bulk of the movement, which is entirely on the level of history as “news,” to the specificity and relative insignificance of the vignettes suggests the need to pull back to particulars, to concrete human instances of the suffering implied by the catalogue of events. The only suggestion of communion is a scene set in Canada with a British and a French sailor sharing drinks and making a minimal exchange in each other’s languages which evidently they do not understand. Does the setting in Canada anticipate that the British too will be the next to fall? At best a precarious alliance between the major nationalities set against the fascist powers in Europe, but perhaps offering a bare glimmer of hope for better understanding in the future.

What is most notable about the concluding vignettes, however, is the prominence of children, and Zukofsky’s ultimate condemnation of society lies in its crushing of children’s dreams. The significance of this in light of Sylvie burying her dolls is clear enough, as is the mention of nightfall as a comment on what has preceded (121). The other two vignettes are even more graphic and blunt—a child hangs himself because he overhears his parents are going to eat his pet rabbit and another steals an egg because he is hungry. While these scenarios capture the human consequences of war, they could just as easily signify its causes, not only in economic depression but in the traumas of childhood that result in unbalanced adults. These children recall the boy in Czarist Russia being marched off to jail or court mentioned in Zukofsky’s Lewis Carroll review (*Prep+* 66), in sharp contrast with the naively utopian child in “A”-8 who enthuses over the *Stratostat*, a high altitude balloon, as indicative of the achievements and hopes of the Soviet experiment (68.15-24). It is these children who are the Lambs of God, who have been betrayed and sacrificed by society’s failures, and it is in their name that we need to reestablish a basis of value if we are to avoid endlessly repeating such disasters. The penultimate stanza concerning sailors who “took the wrong soundings” refers to failed leadership that became lost in abstractions or ideologies de-anchored from a grounding in actual lived experience (123). The poem would indicate that these lost sailors are primarily political leaders and the phrase “ship of state” lingers in the near background, but aside from children and war’s victims the condemnation could just as well apply to any sphere of society.

If we place “A”-10 back into the sequence of “A”, the most obvious characteristic that distinguishes this movement is precisely its historical specificity, even more so than “A”-8. At the risk of belaboring the obvious, this is a measure of the historical pressures of its moment, which culminate in a sense of history that is about to dissolve, although it is hardly possible to recognize what this means yet. As such, “A”-10 marks why the subsequent movements of “A”

must situate themselves differently vis-à-vis contemporary history, and to characterize this change as simply a retreat into the personal is pointlessly reductive.² In the first place, the fact that history will never again exert itself so directly in “A”—although there are possibilities for comparison here with “A”-15—is more than merely a matter of Zukofsky’s subjective development and perspective, since with World War II the sense of history does change. During the first four decades of the century, there was a readily identifiable, if complex and conflicted, radical tradition that offered a viable possibility for the West to realize its purported social ideals, but instead it has been outdone by fascist revolutions, while the Soviet leadership had abandoned revolution for the expediency of rapprochement—“A”-10’s catalogue of disasters concludes with a reference to Molotov and the Hitler-Stalin Pact (121). For Zukofsky, as for so many others, the social possibilities of his early poetry were premised on the struggle for an ameliorated society, however mediated and complex poetry’s relation to that struggle might be, but the world confronting and depicted by “A”-10 is one that leaves the poet with little to say other than an expression of outrage and a plea to remember the children. Probably already, but certainly in the aftermath of the war, the possibilities for a viable leftist discourse had evaporated, indeed for any plausible utopian discourse, at least in the U.S. context (for further remarks on this point, see the commentary to “A”-12).

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² Comens, who is virtually the only commentator on “A”-10, argues that the movement is pivotal in the overall trajectory of “A” (153-157).