

“A”-15 is the best known of the 1960s movements of “A”, largely because it begins spectacularly with a homophonic rendition from the Book of Job and also features one of the pivotal public events of post-World War II America, the assassination of President Kennedy.¹ However, we immediately confront a difficulty: how do we account for the relationship between this opening and the main event, not just thematically but in terms of their radically different compositional techniques and verbal textures. “A”-15 is the only post-“A”-12 movement that reverts to the earlier collage mode, with formally diverse chunks of materials allowed to lie in loose juxtaposition rather than being subsumed into one of the flexible predetermined forms (primarily the use of a word-count line) that Zukofsky otherwise preferred from “A”-13 (1960) onward. The diversity of the textual pieces is not simply a matter of content, nor even of discursive or tonal variety, but extends to the compositional handling of these materials, which ranges from the homophonic transmutations to collage to a four-page block quotation. Such tonal and compositional heterogeneity is disconcerting, gravitating against the natural inclination to identify a dominate under which to organize the poem, and any account of the movement must come to terms with these formal challenges.

As a rough map, we can identify four major parts to “A”-15:

- 1) an opening homophonic translation of passages from the Book of Job (359-360);
- 2) a central segment, loosely staged as the thoughts and memories of the poet, that circle around the death and funeral of President Kennedy (360-368);
- 3) a long quotation from Edward Gibbon’s *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, which summarizes that work’s main argument (370-373);
- 4) a collocation of diverse passages that concludes with a personal description of William Carlos Williams’ funeral followed by several short snippets from the *Iliad*: the first concerning Odysseus’ return from the night raid with Diomedes to capture Rhesus’ horses (Book X) which segues into descriptions of lamenting women (373-375).

This schema is somewhat arbitrary and leaves out significant pieces, such as a biographical segment on Bach (366-367), as well as the six-line coda I will eventually examine in some detail, but as a preliminary overview this blocks out the major structure of the movement.

Putting aside for the moment the homophonically generated opening passage, this superficially looks quite like a Poundian canto: a poem including history presented in collagist manner that incorporates numerous quotations, many of which come from standard canonical works of Western culture. What is missing, however, is any apparent meta-commentary or critical point of view to indicate how the reader is expected to organize these disparate pieces around a theme or into an argument. The difficulty with “A”-15 (and the late Zukofsky generally) is not that there is a problem drawing out thematic relations between its details, as I will show in a moment, but that they do not appear to add up to the judgment in response to crisis and violence that the materials seem to demand. This compels us to look beyond the various thematic concerns that are thrown up to consider the formal composition, not least the peculiar, even compulsive and seemingly inappropriate mixing of linguistic registers and verbal play in which Zukofsky invariably indulges.

¹ An earlier and much shorter version of this commentary on “A”-15 is incorporated into my article, “What Were the ‘Objectivist’ Poets,” *Modernism/Modernity* (2015).

In broad terms, there is little difficulty discerning general thematic connections across “A”-15, most obviously that of lamentation relating to the violence of history and its victims. The two textual cornerstones of Western culture, the Old Testament and Homer (the Hebraic and the Greek), suggest a culturally foundational condition, with Gibbon’s Roman Empire (which juxtaposes Christian and martial pagan values) perhaps historically midway to its contemporary manifestations. However, there is no obvious thematic progression or thesis, no Poundian style argument about historical tendencies or cultural critique. Rather this is more like a simple statement of a pervasive human condition, of power and suffering, but presented through an unusual diversity, not so much of instances, as of styles or rhetoric. In the central section, the U.S. and the world participate in the public ceremony of grief for JFK that is being played out non-stop on the media, and in which this poem is playing its own part. The details of the funeral are punctuated by flashbacks to recent events of Kennedy’s public life, as Zukofsky seems here to accept, or at least use, the Kennedy myth that the “young man” represented a hope for a new beginning, a new political style that would break out of the deadlock of the Cold War, but which now has been extinguished. Threaded into the Kennedy section are references to Robert Frost—Kennedy’s unofficial poet laureate—and William Carlos Williams, both of whom died earlier in the same year as Kennedy’s assassination. The common grief of the nation (as well as Zukofsky’s private grief for Williams) is echoed by or echoes that of the women on both sides of the Trojan conflict in the *Iliad*, and curiously the last passage Zukofsky quotes is merely a catalogue of Nereids who act as supporting chorus for Thesis’ lamentations over Achilles’ doom: a list of 33 names that could be extended indefinitely to include our own. The lamenting women in Homer obviously relate to and serve as something of a chorus to the prominent role Jackie Kennedy is given, as she and her young children became the focal point of the public funereal rites for JFK. How Gibbon fits into all this remains rather puzzling, but perhaps we can begin to discern connections in his admiration of the virile virtues on which the Roman Empire had been built and maintained as opposed to the more effeminate and otherworldly values that he argued ultimately caused its downfall. In this manner one can tease out across the disjunct segments various threads on the general topics of violence, suffering and mourning. Perhaps, then, “A”-15 uses the American experience of the Kennedy assassination—shock and grief within the context of the Cold War—to suggest our common historical participation as both sufferers and perpetrators of violence and war.

However, on its own this weaving of thematic threads is limited in that it fails to adequately account for the poem, or more precisely for its presentation. In particular it does not help us read what is always most striking in Zukofsky’s work: the foregrounding of the formal elements of the text, including, as here, the disconcerting mixture of verbal textures. We can never satisfactorily discuss “A” by reducing given movements to themes or arguments, nor if we tackle its formal complexities without recognizing the disconcerting mix that refuses to settle into a dominate tone, say of lamentation, that might establish the guiding leitmotif. Not only are there striking contrasts between the major segments of the movement outlined above, but even within them Zukofsky cannot resist word-play or interpolating the seemingly trivial. Toward the end, leading up to the description of Williams’ funeral, we encounter a scrap of nonsense verse, mention of a female cosmonaut bruising her nose and a garbled couplet that initially appears to make little sense. But of course the ringer is that homophonic translation from the Book of Job that starts things off.

Job

“A”-15 opens with a dictionary definition of a hinny, the offspring of a stallion and a female donkey, and this curious birth presumably introduces the immediately following Job

passage, the hybrid progeny of Old Testament Hebrew and English, which indeed does include some neighing (hinny as a verb can mean to neigh or whinny).² The passage reworks lines from throughout the Book of Job but particularly from the climatic whirlwind section, in which Yahweh directly confronts Job, and the line with slight variations that functions as a refrain, “Wind: Yahweh at Iyyob ‘Why yammer,’” clues the reader to the Hebrew source as well as succinctly encapsulating Yahweh’s reproof. On the reasonable assumption that the reader is familiar with Job, it is easy to draw thematic links with the other key segments of the movement, most obviously that of senseless violence and suffering, and a sense of indignation at the perversities of higher powers. In the heyday of popular Existentialism, Job was a “relevant” text. But beyond this general level of allusion, Zukofsky’s presentation hardly invites close thematic analysis.

The homophonic rendering encourages the reader to sound and listen to the text, but as such this does not get one very far. A common assumption is that this is supposed to sound like or at least aurally suggest the original Hebrew, and this has been claimed to be the case by some who are better qualified to judge than I, but I remain dubious. Zukofsky did not have any real familiarity with Hebrew, much less could he have expected most of his readers to be able to hear Hebrew. Unlike *Catullus* where every syllable is “translated,” here Zukofsky skips around freely, ignoring Hebrew words and occasionally interpolating English words that do not appear to be suggested by the Hebrew text. The Job passage is generally more garbled and resistant to paraphrase than is *Catullus*, most obviously because Latin or Romance languages throw up all manner of cognates whereas Hebrew does not. While the semantic content is not so much negated as dispersed and the text clearly foregrounds the sonic, the latter itself is quite scattered and cannot be readily recuperated into the thematic in terms of tonal quality or musicality. Nor is it plausible that the overall sound is that of lamentation or dirge: over any stretch of more than a few lines, Zukofsky’s homophonic translations veer erratically in terms of tonal qualities or, perhaps saying the same thing differently, individual readers will inevitably intone such a passage variously since the familiar tonal indicators are lacking. Homophonic translation tends to encourage tonal instability and the mixing of registers, and while one can detect words and phrases appropriate to the thematic of violence and suffering, the comical is constantly raising its head as well. The very wackiness of homophonic rendering guarantees a ubiquitous humor: if when one encounters a “giddy pair” of “stones” (“A”, 360), one detects testicles (those of the Behemoth in this case), I believe that is as Zukofsky intended—although “giddy” is an apt adjective for the passage generally. Indeed the very lead-in with the definition of a hinny and then the neighing evoked in the first line of the Job passage proper hardly seems an appropriately somber start to a poem that is commonly assumed to be a lament.

Of course this entire horsey business is more Zukofsky than Job. Zukofsky never foregoes the delights of verbal wit and intricacy merely for the sake of thematic development, and this is a text which insistently turns on itself. If we examine the opening set of lines, there are some ominous images—“cruel hire” or “rot off”—but then the fourth line, which ends with “echo,” quite literally enacts an echoing of the first word or apostrophe of the preceding line, “Lo.” Then we have a line that might be paraphrased as “how do I deal with many languages” or “give (deal) me many languages.” The terminal word, “yammer,” which appears six times in the passage and can be taken as the pivotal term, means to lament or complain—etymologically derived from German (it retains this same meaning in

² This neighing effect is quite pronounced in Zukofsky’s readings of the Job passage. See PennSound, readings dated 29 April 1971 and 13 Dec. 1975.

contemporary German (*jammern*), often in the sense of to whine).³ Nevertheless, in contemporary English it is quite impossible to hear this word in an entirely solemn manner, and Yahweh's repeated command that Job stop yammering is surely comical.

The following line, "Naked on the face of white rock—sea," does not sound like a homophonic rendering but more like typical late Zukofsky, which evidently it is (in Zukofsky's readings of the passage, this line sticks out as well). This line calls for a meta-textual reading, the blank page against or in the sea of disorder or "yammer," the word that terminates the immediately preceding line. Or "yammer" is what we put down on that blank page to counter the powers of disorder. If being naked on a rock surrounded by or facing the sea is an image of exposure and vulnerability, "sea" for the veteran reading of "A" always needs to be punningly rolled out: sea = see = C (=Celia). So the threat of the sea becomes an instruction to look, to read the page—but to see the page means to closely eye and ear it, and then the page does become a face or perhaps numerous faces, those "many coeval" yammerings swarming in and among the words. Zukofsky will see Celia. So as the passage continues, lament gives way to a semblance of a "hymn," a nest that suggests a watered garden or orchard, in the middle of which appears the phrase "shore she," the beloved as a haven from the dangers of the sea.⁴ If one has acute eyes and memory, one might notice that the naked rock line is a condensed version of two lines from "A"-13, where the white rock is inscribed with some graffiti: "Do you love?" (293). This is what any page asks or enacts, indicating why, how and to whom we write or read—why we must yammer. The Book of Job is a parable of a human stripped naked, and in the end the only response or counter to that condition is protest or lament, that is the Book of Job itself, which is an act of seeking a sense of being with others—that is, love.⁵ The rest of the Job passage comes entirely from the climatic whirlwind chapters of Job and returns to the more obdurately homophonic manner, but we have already been clued in to how to read it, and we need to see and hear beyond Job simply being put in his place.

The phrase "many coeval yammer" is suggestive, especially in the context of a homophonic translation. In contrast to Pound who liberally sprinkles foreign quotations throughout the *Cantos* or to Joyce who invents words by blending cognates from numerous languages, Zukofsky rarely uses foreign words or phrases and no matter how liberated his syntax his vocabulary always remains scrupulously English. Yet his homophonic renditions, by drawing attention to oral instability or the sliding of words and the fracturing of the syntax, persistently flush out the sense of the foreign in English—as if what superficially

³ In contemporary English, yammer tends to mean to rattle on, to talk volubly in a tiresome or meaningless manner. In Zukofsky's favorite *Century Dictionary*, however, this meaning does not appear but only its more etymologically correct meanings: to lament, wail, shriek, yell, cry aloud, whimper loudly, whine; secondarily, it can mean to yearn, desire.

⁴ These lines are for the most part worked from the English translation of Job 29:18-20: "Then I said, I shall die in my nest, and I shall multiply my days as the sand. My root was spread out by the waters, and the dew lay all night upon my branch. My glory was fresh in me, and my bow was renewed in my hand." However a few details in the middle, including the phrase "shore she," are homophonically suggested by the Hebrew. It is notable that Zukofsky's rendering substitutes for the wish to die in my nest, the desire to "liveforever" in his nest. Liveforever is a type of plant that appears prominently in the early movements of "A" (4, 7, 40, 41) and will reappear in *80 Flowers* (CSP 326).

⁵ In "A"-14 Zukofsky indicates that he doubts the authenticity of the ending to the Book of Job, in which Job wins back everything he has lost. Zukofsky evidently believed this was tacked on by "the pious" disturbed by the manifest injustice of Job's sufferings ("A" 350-251).

looks English is always on the verge of dissolving into something else. The foreign is not placed side by side, as in Pound, where the authentic distinctness of each articulation must be maintained and can never quite be adequately translated, nor is there the blending of world languages that gestures toward an image of an arch-language, but English is a site where all other languages potentially impinge given that all languages intersect to a greater or lesser degree. For Zukofsky any words or their combinations are densely sedimented with the ghosts of their histories, which are at the same time their latent possibilities—thus, he suggests, the epos that might be discovered in a consideration of “the” and “a” (*Prep+* 10). This is more the concern of or assumption behind the Job passage than its specific source, as culturally resonant as that particular source may be.

How are we to consider the Job passage within the context of “A”-15, if it is something more than the outlandish fireworks it usually has been taken to be? Most obviously the passage foregrounds the material signifiers of the text: not only the sonic but the visual thereness of the text intrudes to the considerable disruption and scattering of the semantic. If the passage is not simply glossed over or dismissed, it requires an intimate handling and sounding of the words and a non-habitual manner of feeling how they go together. Particularly given its placement at the beginning of the movement, a plausible implication would be that this hybrid text affects the others, suggesting dimensions within and between them so that the rest of the passages must also be sounded and listened to, rather than merely read. The lack of authorial guidance with respect to the relations between the various textual units of the movement opens up not an interpretive free for all, wherein anyone can impute whatever intention they like, but that the textual units are necessary hybrid, vexed and internally contested. A related consequence is that the themes or arguments we seek to contain and organize the details of the poem are constantly being short-circuited. Since Williams plays a major role in “A”-15, we might Zukofskize his famous dictum as, “No ideas but in words,” with the proviso that those words will always problematize their ideas. The Job passage functions in an important sense as a reading lesson, and in this respect is similar to the various preludes Zukofsky attached to the beginning of most of the long movements of the 1960s—“A”-14, -15, -18, -19, as well as “A”-22. All of these preludes were written as discrete poems and in some cases published as such, and all of them in one manner or another point the reader away from what the poem simply says to the consideration of what it is doing.⁶

Gibbon

One can hardly imagine a starker rhetorical contrast to the razzle-dazzle noise of the Job passage than the long, apparently straight-forward quotation from Edward Gibbon—that exemplary figure of Enlightenment rationalism. This passage is unique in “A”, both because it is by far the longest single quotation and because it presents a complete argument. It is not only that “A”, especially in the later movements, goes to some extremes to avoid argumentation, but Zukofsky was always highly skeptical of historical explanations. Essentially, the quotation presents in toto the famous chapter 38 summarizing the argument of *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, which Zukofsky has considerably abridged through deletions but retained all the key points. Gibbon sees history in terms of a Manichean-like struggle between the forces of barbarism and civilization, between instinct and reason, with the relative balance waxing and waning over time. If this demarcation is clear on the global scale of the Roman Empire and the various barbarous forces that oppose

⁶ The Job passage was published as a small fine-press chapbook, *Iyyob*, designed and printed by Barry Hall and Tom Raworth for Turret Books (London) in 1965.

it, this is also played out internally and more ambiguously since the early Roman values of individual rights, asceticism and a martial ethos derive from the instinctive values of the barbarian but organized and restrained within codes of law and ethical conduct. When these pragmatic, worldly values are undermined by decadence and other-worldliness (fear of death), infamously ascribed in part to the influence of Christianity, the moral fiber of the Empire erodes, rendering it vulnerable to the forces of barbarism and instigating a long slide into the Dark Ages.

Again, if we were reading a Poundian canto we would feel quite confident about how to read such a quotation. We might need to ask whether or not the passage should be read ironically, but we would know that its argument was a relevant comment on the poet's reading of history and particularly the present.⁷ But Zukofsky does not handle his source materials this way, especially in his post-World War II work, and one should never assume that quotations ventriloquize his own views, even though there are undoubtedly many local instances where this is plausibly the case. Surely the political machinations of the mid-century period, as well as the example of Pound, had something to do with Zukofsky's wariness about deploying historical materials in his poem after the 1930s. If Zukofsky wanted to suggest that Gibbon's view of the dissolution of the Roman Empire had parallels with contemporary America or the Cold War world, on the one hand it would hardly require such an extensive excerpt and on the other he could have left some hints about, say, American imperialism elsewhere in the movement, but he does not. It may be plausible that Zukofsky implies an identity between the values of the early Imperial Rome that Gibbon so admired and those of the early American republic. The historical argument of "A"-8 implied, through the historical works of Henry and Brooks Adams (direct intellectual heirs of the Enlightenment), a falling away from the original values that instigated the American Revolution, which might (in the 1930s) be revived or reset in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution.⁸ However, it is by no means evident how one can map Gibbon's argument onto American or contemporary history in any detail. Zukofsky surely was not an admirer of the sort of ascetic martial values Gibbon argues underpinned Rome's greatest period. And who would be the present day barbarians? Some has suggested they would be the various anti-colonial struggles (e.g. in Vietnam or Africa), with which Zukofsky was sympathetic, even if he was pessimistic about their ultimate futures.⁹ History's barbarism and violence are not simply the antithetical manifestations of reason and civilization but of their very exclusions and repressions. Yet even such an ironic reading of Gibbon is problematic, in the first place because within "A"-15 none of the contemporary history that is presented (mostly concerned with JFK) has an apparent relation to Gibbon's themes. One might look elsewhere—to "A"-14 for sympathetic references to the anti-colonial struggles or to "A"-18 (not yet written) to

⁷ For a lively attempt at such a Poundian reading of "A"-15 within the framework of post-colonialism, see Mark McMorris, "Postcolonial 'A'? Empire & Nation in Louis Zukofsky's American Movements, A-14 – A-17," *Xcp: Cross-Cultural Poetics* 8 (2001): 11-22.

⁸ See Z-notes commentary on "A"-8. There is an anecdote, apparently propagated by Guy Davenport, that one day Zukofsky opened up Gibbon and gave up on Marx (*The Geography of the Imagination: Forty Essays* (North Point Press, 1981): 194). This claim is surely nonsense and presumably reflects Davenport's own political orientation. Aside from the fact that Zukofsky's notebooks indicate that he was rereading Marx in the late 1960s and used him for a couple lines in "A"-22, Zukofsky simply did not read, judge or use texts according to whether or not he agreed with their explicit arguments, nor am I aware of any early enthusiasm that he later simply repudiated.

⁹ See McMorris and also Mark Scroggins, *The Poem of a Life: A Biography of Louis Zukofsky* (2007): 389-390.

the Vietnam War—but even there one cannot find what amounts to anything like an argument about contemporary history with which Gibbon’s could be configured. So if we insist on reading the Gibbon passage in this manner it functions as a free-floating allegory or paradigm where the reader can attempt to fit Gibbon’s broad argument to whatever modern and contemporary historical situation seems applicable. The most plausible analogy between Gibbon and contemporary history is ideological: the fixed dualistic struggle that was the Cold War mirrors in essential respects Gibbon’s civilization versus barbarism reading of history. This Cold War mindset was a vicious circle that evidently Zukofsky, like many others, believed Kennedy offered some hope of breaking, or at least that appears to be the general point of a number of the Kennedy details included in “A”-15.

If we recall my claims for the Job passage—that it is meant to tune our ears—then we should avoid being too readily taken in my Gibbon’s argument. The quotation functions as neither an oblique expression of Zukofsky’s own views nor ironically as simply a negative example, but rather as a necessarily complex dialogue which if heard begins to open out to other texts in any number of ways. Zukofsky presents it at such length so that we can listen to this particular sort of discourse—its form of reason, its argumentative completeness, its need to exclude. It is ultimately less a matter of the strengths and weaknesses of Gibbon’s particular argument than its very discursive mastery—its clear-eyed analysis and iconoclasm, its ironies and wit, the very massiveness of its endeavor. Gibbon’s summarizing chapter was explicitly meant as a history lesson for the present—that is, for England during the decisive period of its empire building—which is less about the dangers of empire than the social values necessary to sustain it. Gibbon has little time for the human costs of empire and took the *pax Romana* quite literally as the high water mark of Western civilization, even while fortune’s inevitable cranking means that empire as the great manifestation of civilization’s assertion against the powers of the irrational seems doomed to self-destruction.

Zukofsky never much trusted history, the attempt to read grand patterns into the infinite welter of human experience. In this respect, the major formative influence on his thinking was of course Henry Adams, a curious case of a great historian who could never quite convince himself of the possibility of history. In *The Education of Henry Adams*, Adams says, repeatedly, that his very need to discover a key to history is seemingly outdated, in fact an inheritance of the Enlightenment. Zukofsky was quite fascinated by Adams’ efforts, but finally his Adams is the same as ours—the skeptical Adams of *The Education* and *Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres*—the historical utopianism of the latter only highlighting its principle as a forever lost, indeed never existing, aesthetic construction.¹⁰ Theories of history, like any other discourse, are efforts to negotiate the overwhelming complexity of our

¹⁰ Although Adams greatly admired Gibbon, *Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres* is in part a direct riposte to *The Decline and Fall* since Adams’ vision of the height of Western civilization is precisely in the middle of the long dark ages Gibbon claims the West slid into with the fall of Rome. While Adams does not ignore the brutality of power in 12th and 13th century France (especially in the “masculine” chapters on Mont-Saint-Michel), he is emphatic that the age was dominated by the force of the feminine, which is directly responsible for the character of its cultural glories—its cathedrals, literature and theology. Adams stresses the role of religion and especially of Mariology in this achievement as opposed to Gibbon’s infamous anti-Christian arguments. In the famous chapter on “The Dynamo and the Virgin” (Chapter 25) in *The Education of Henry Adams*, Adams indicates he is responding quite directly to “his idol Gibbon” and the latter’s remark on the Gothic cathedrals as “stately monuments fo superstition.” See also the remarks on Gibbon in *The Education*, Chapters 6—the former is quoted in “4 Other Countries” as Zukofsky meditates on Adams mediating on Gibbon in Rome (*CSP* 185-187).

situations, but they become dangerous when hypostatized into argumentative truths. What Gibbon represses or leaves out is not barbarism, which is Enlightenment's necessary other, but the suffering of Job and Homer's women. Indeed, as mentioned, in terms of the values necessary for empire, Gibbon admires manly suffering and disparages feminine softness. A passage that leads into the Gibbon quotation describes a hunting party with hawks in Persia that ends with the falconer taking the "living see-see" (a partridge) from the hawk and dismembering it with his bare hands, rewarding the hawk with the legs.¹¹ The moral of this tale seems clear enough. The quotation is introduced by giving the place, Birjand, and the date, October 5911, which we are then parenthetically told is an anagram, since in fact the date in his source is 1915. Aside from being another instance of Zukofsky's incorrigible fooling around, this anagramming suggests that the date does not matter—such blood sports are perennial, the symptoms of the cultivation of the manly martial values that manifest themselves in empire building or perhaps in history-making in general. Since this is Zukofsky, a phrase like "living see-see" has its additional resonances—as already mentioned, his ubiquitous interest in seeing as living (not to mention other punning possibilities such as C = Celia) as elaborated at such length in *Bottom*. "A"-15 is concerned with history's suffering and the need for that level of empathy if there is to be some hope of mitigating that trauma. The immediate aftermath of the JFK assassination was a moment of national and even global commonality in grief, in the recognition of the madness of historical violence (at one point Zukofsky evokes the Homeric image of Até, goddess of blind folly, trampling over men's heads (363)). But Zukofsky offers this with little hope that anything will really change, and as he says, after a few days of mourning, business returned to normal (368).

Zukofsky concludes his long quotation with a famous sentence in which Gibbon expresses a guarded belief in progress: even in periods of barbarism's dominance there is an increment of civilization that is retained, the specific example is the scythe, while certain barbarous practices gradually disappear for good: "But the scythe, the invention or emblem of Saturn, still continued annually to mow the harvests of Italy; and the human feasts of the Laestrigons [cannibalism] have never been renewed on the coast of Campania." Zukofsky leaves out the following final paragraph in which Gibbon more emphatically states his belief in historical progress, which no doubt Zukofsky would have felt was redundant, aside from his own more skeptical viewpoint. Nevertheless the quoted sentence is notable for its lyricism, quite in contrast to the general manner of the rest of the chapter. But most important is that this touches on history as the everyday existence of ordinary people or the *longue durée*, which is where Zukofsky's sense of history lies, rather than in the events that occupy the newspapers and most of what is designated "history," including Gibbon's.

Women

As long as the Gibbon quotation is, its framing is significant because both before and after there is the notable mention of women. Somewhat oddly there are seven lines preceding the start of the quotation presented as part of the same block of materials, which appear to consist of three distinct pieces (370). In reverse order, there is a prophetic statement about a fourth kingdom that is emblemized as iron, set in italics to indicate it is a quotation. It is in fact from the Book of Daniel (2:40), which Zukofsky picked up from a reference in Gibbon, since this passage has traditionally been read as prophesying the Roman Empire. While stressing its iron strength that breaks up and absorbs all smaller powers, the fact that it is the "fourth" and a "kingdom" also indicates its ephemerality—kingdoms always come and go. Immediately preceding is the very odd line, "Woe woman woo woman," which I will return

¹¹ Zukofsky's source for this passage is F. Hale, *From Persian Uplands* (1920).

to, but simply note for the moment the verbally playful manner. This playfulness is also pronounced in the first three lines of the “stanza,” which mention rotten teeth and a car hitting a dog. What is striking here, aside from the fact that this seems apropos nothing, is the seeming triviality—about as contrasting as possible from the somber prophecy of Daniel leading into the long, analytical discourse of Gibbon. Again it is the ears that need to be tuned to appreciate these carefully worked lines, each with a distinct rhythm and obvious alliterative effects. Together with the woe woman line, these are set in counter-point to the Gibbon quotation that follows: mundane concerns, women and verbal play—what conventionally tends to fall outside of standard “history.” We can also quickly note the preceding few lines set off on their own—a seeming garble, although “Eros” appears prominently. If we retain a mental echo of the opening Job passage, then we might note a resemblance that begins to set us on our way. I will return to these lines in a moment.

Jumping several pages to the end of the Gibbon quotation (373), it is immediately followed by a children’s or nonsense rhyme concerning “lady Rich,” which we might relate in manner as well as topic with the “woe woman” line. This in fact is immediately confirmed by a line that puns on Nietzsche + woe and continues with a female astronaut (actually a cosmonaut) who bruised her nose during a landing, which in turn leads into mention of the wives of poets segueing into the passage describing William Carlos Williams’ funeral.¹² This in turn will lead into the final passage climaxing with lamenting women from the *Iliad*. Among all this miscellaneousness what stands out is the presence of women, and, as I have already hinted, this is to be brought to bear in critical counter-point to the Gibbon passage and its emphasis on masculine virtues. We are first of all reminded of who gets crushed by the iron kingdom, the violence of history and its victims. From a traditional viewpoint, we would have to say that Zukofsky’s handling of the female materials seems comparatively frivolous next to the expansive grandeur of Gibbon’s summation. But the trivial, mundane and comical, as well as the insistent verbal play is what one finds everywhere in Zukofsky’s work, and is undoubtedly a main reason why many readers are put off. Consequently there is always a crowd around the first half of “A”-9 because surely here is serious (political) matter, although one should not overlook the comedy in things pleading that they are not loved enough and the wit of taking Cavalcanti’s decidedly dark canzone and filling it up with Marx and then Spinoza. As I have already suggested in relation to the rendering of Job, Zukofsky is endlessly mixing in what we might expect to be inappropriate, but this is precisely his sense of things. Clearly excessive sobriety, beginning with taking ourselves and our poetry too seriously, is a basic symptom of our unbalanced condition, and Zukofsky liked to quote Spinoza, usually taken to be a somber fellow, on the necessity of merriment.¹³ The point is that what appears frivolous and comical in Zukofsky should not be devalued against the heavy stuff, and we are reminded that these very valuations are necessarily implicated in each other.

As mentioned, the concluding passage (not counting the brief coda) consists entirely of snippets from the *Iliad* (374-375). It begins with the famous night raid episode from Book X made by Odysseus and Diomedes, in which they slaughter sleeping Thracians and steal the famed horses of Rhesus. Zukofsky selects the moment when Odysseus returns to camp with his loot and responds with false modesty to Nestor’s question as to where he obtained these magnificent horses, then very elliptically he bathes, sits down to dinner and thinks.

¹² Threaded in these lines, as Zukofsky’s notebooks indicate (HRC 3.16), is a private joke. The Nietzsche pun was apparently inspired by Celia bruising her knee, or perhaps her exclamation on injuring it, which evidently leads to the association with the cosmonaut bumping her nose.

¹³ See *Bottom* 78, 192; “A”-12.184.15-16; *Prep+* 54; also “A”-9.109.18.

Interpolated into this succinct passage that quotes the prose translation of W.H.D. Rouse is an odd reference to Penelope: “and he who with his wife / deceived even pride as she suffered” (374). Apparently this is inserted by Zukofsky, conflating a reference to Odysseus’ false modesty with deceiving his wife, presumably referring to the well-known episode in the *Odyssey* when Odysseus finally returns home in disguise and tests Penelope’s faithfulness. The lines undermine Odysseus’ heroic pretensions and explicitly relate this to his attitude and treatment of his wife. The raid itself is an instance of heroic bravura, as their mission was simply to carry out some reconnaissance. The mention of Odysseus’ bath becomes the pivot that leads to other baths, primarily of women’s tears, and the sense of doom on both sides of the Trojan conflict—first Hecuba’s reaction to Hector’s insistence on returning to the field of battle that will result in his death and then Thetis accompanied by the choir of her nymphs reacting to the news of Achilles’ anger, which she knows will seal his doom. So this is what Odysseus’ heroic ethos amount to.

If we turn back to those few lines of garble that immediately precede the passage that includes the lengthy quotation from Gibbon (370), the reader will not be surprised to learn that they are a homophonic rendition from Sophocles’ *Antigone*—more classical lamenting women. However, unlike the Job passage there is no clue in the poem as to the source of these lines, and they are not presented as an allusion, however relevant the themes of this particular tragedy would seem to be. Indeed, if these lines are to be read as an allusion, it is not to *Antigone* but to the similarly rendered Job passage that starts off “A”-15. I have examined these lines in some detail elsewhere (see Z-Notes commentary on *Catullus*), so will simply make a quick observation. As a type of homophonic echo of the opening Job passage, these lines again remind the reader to turn away from a narrow focus on denotation to the other qualities of the words, most obviously to listen to them. So as I have already indicated, in this sense the lines can be seen as preparing for the Gibbon quotation that begins a few lines later—that we need to listen closely to Gibbon, not just digest his argument.

All these female presences, particularly in the latter part of the movement, function as a chorus of sorts for Gibbon but also for Jackie Kennedy, who Zukofsky presents, as did the media of the time, as the iconic focal point of the public mourning rites for JFK. Jackie Kennedy is appropriately somber, stoic and glamorous, but this image branded into the minds of all Americans and much of the rest of the world is considerably amplified and complicated by Zukofsky’s handling within the larger context of the movement. From Job to the *Iliad* to Jackie Kennedy we have a certain poetic lesson in reading a whole cluster of significances behind the media image of Jackie as the focal image of America’s momentary self-absorption in a specific death.

Kennedy and Williams

So far we have circled around the episode presumably at the heart of “A”-15: the assassination of JFK. This returns us to the question as to how the main pieces of the movement relate and my claim that Zukofsky refuses to provide an argumentative or thematic framework to guide us in the manner we would expect in a Poundian canto. There is the general concern with the violence of history and lament, but these are baggy topics which hardly explain the basis of analogy between JFK’s death and Job or Gibbon on the dialectic between civilization and barbarism. To begin with, we might notice how Zukofsky refuses to remain focused on the main event, constantly interrupting the sketchy narrative so that the development of an elegiac or lamenting tone is dispersed. In fact, Zukofsky deliberately deflects the tendency to fetishize JFK’s death as a big event, an event in which the nation becomes self-absorbed. It is true that for those who lived through it, not much is required to evoke strong feelings and associations. The details of JFK’s death and funeral are not matters

of Zukofsky's presentation but of the public media, and while the poet's associated memories individualize JFK's significance, this too is hardly unique or subjective but necessarily public. As such the event of JFK's death and funeral is epiphenomenal, and Zukofsky concludes the whole segment with the observation that after a few days the stock market recovered and the TV commercials returned as usual (368). What is glimpsed in the reaction to JFK's death, when as Zukofsky says the entire nation and even the world grieved as one family (364), is a commonality with the broader human experience of suffering the violence of history. The poem therefore dilutes the event of JFK's death in a textual space that moves both outward into historical and cultural memory, as well as inward or subjectively to the poet's or reader's more personal experiences and memories. The problem is to bridge these experiences, the historical and the personal, which comes down to a sense of being in the world with others, sharing a common fate that nonetheless must be felt and realized not as an abstraction but in the immediacy of one's own life. The key bridging figure in the poem, I will argue, is Williams.

The organizational spine of the Kennedy segment (360-368) is a chronological sequence of key moments: 1) Kennedy's assassination appearing here in the image of the President's bleeding head on Jackie's lap combined with the return of his body from Dallas to Washington (363); 2) brief excerpts from a famous eulogy spoken by Senator Mansfield when Kennedy's body lay in state (366); and 3) details from the final funeral procession (368).¹⁴ Any American of the time would have been familiar with these images and many others that would fill out the entire sequence of events over a few days, during which, as Zukofsky points out, they played out non-stop on TV (364). These key moments are augmented by various recent memories of Kennedy, which often lead to further associations. For the moment, I will leave aside the first three pages of the Kennedy segment which are actually dominated by Williams, except to point out that Zukofsky sets up this entire segment as the thoughts and memories of the poet, so that tentatively it can be organized within a loosely stream of consciousness framework. As already mentioned, these memories of JFK tend to portray him as the hope for a different style of politics, as one might expect of the left-liberal Zukofsky following the decade of the 1950s dominated by the conservative party and the worst social manifestations of the Cold War. Zukofsky includes some thinly disguised satire of Barry Goldwater as the type of the political shyster spouting patriotic Cold War buzzwords (364-365). We see Kennedy in Ireland acknowledging his immigrant roots and displaying both his humor and rejection of aristocratic pretensions (364)¹⁵; we see his willingness to stand up to big business (365); and finally his advocacy for the Test Ban Treaty marking the first step in limiting nuclear weapons. This latter issue is notably interwoven with his testimonial remarks on Robert Frost, which in turn relates back to early in the segment that mentions JFK sending the poet as a good-will ambassador to the Soviet Union (361). So, as Zukofsky presents him, JFK is a politician capable of transcending mere politics, of which his recognition of the social value of the poet is no doubt evidence.

¹⁴ The chronology is as follows: Friday, 22 Nov. 1963 JFK is assassinated in Dallas; 23 Nov. his body is flown back to Washington, D.C.; 24 Nov. the body is conveyed in a military procession to the Capitol building for public viewing, where a number of eulogies were given; Monday 25 Nov. another military procession including Jackie Kennedy and her children takes the body to the White House, then to a requiem mass and finally to the burial in Arlington National Cemetery.

¹⁵ The quotation is by Lord Edward Fitzgerald, an Irish patriot who revoked his aristocratic privileges and died attempting to organize a rebellion against the British overlords. Kennedy was a Fitzgerald on his mother's side and it was of course his middle name, but Lord Fitzgerald was not one of his ancestors, as he knew, although he liked to think so.

This description covers the main event, but as mentioned does not adequately account for the larger presentation, which seems designed to distract from an emotional focus on JFK's death. Overall there is a propensity to drift that persistently introduces incongruous tonal variations, including Zukofsky's typical punning. Even in the memories of Kennedy, which I suggest sketch a portrait of hope that gives measure to the current sense of loss, also introduce dissonant tonal accents that gravitate against the building of an elegiac mood. At the moment Zukofsky mentions that everyone participates as one grieving family, he introduces a quotation from Fidel Castro of all people. In the first instance, this indicates just how universal the family of grief becomes when the most implacable figure of the Cold War enemy, in the wake of the Bay of Pigs and the Cuban Missile Crisis, offers his condolences—the Cold War for a moment is suspended. But at the same time, Castro expresses this from a good socialist perspective, emphasizing both the importance and relative smallness of any individual in society, which in turn leads into the anecdote (first memory) on Kennedy's visit to Ireland that I suggested indicates his egalitarian credentials. This in turn reflects a view of history that undermines the focus on specific individuals and events at the expense of the common, which implicitly critiques or at least distances itself from the high pomp of the public funeral rituals for JFK that are especially emphasized in Mansfield's eulogy and the details given of the final funeral procession. In the predominately collage presentation of the movement, the main event of JFK's death and funeral is refracted and diffused in any number of directions, not least tonally, so as to undermine the obsessive focus on the dead political leader for the recognition of our common participation as a community, which is necessary rather than momentary. While the various vignette-memories of JFK do augment the sense of what has been lost, the poem refuses to circle around and build on that sense, but instead strives to bring this sense of loss—of historical violence and suffering—into our everyday awareness of being with others. In this sense, Zukofsky's handling deliberately works against the ephemerality of the public, media dominated presentation.

In the final vignette describing details of the funeral procession, Zukofsky focuses on the riderless horse “Black Jack' Sardar,” who followed the casket in full military garb with boots in stirrups facing backwards—symbolic of the fallen commander. But Zukofsky includes another detail, that of the horse shying, suggesting that it is shying from the procession and even from history. The shying of Black Jack was a notable moment in the funeral procession, which otherwise tended to be lugubriously uneventful—a rigorously planned elegiac event in which the creation of the proper tone was crucial.¹⁶ That Zukofsky explicitly identifies the horse with the poet hardly surprises us, given the ubiquity of this identification throughout “A”. Typical too is the play on the double sense of “shy,” and at times Zukofsky described himself as shy, which seems to implicate both a personal diffidence vis-à-vis the public and a manner of writing, a preference for reticence or indirection—two senses that of course implicate and motivate each other. The poet's impulse is to veer from the public rituals surrounding JFK's death for some more personal and common sense of the moment, a shying from historical event to an underlying strata of human suffering, and therefore a more indirect handling of the public topic. After describing Black Jack's symbolic getup, Zukofsky abruptly switches to the mention of two of his own short poems: “Finally a valentine,” which he says he would have inscribed to JFK if he had asked, and “After reading, a song,” which he says was written for JFK's death. These poems, neither of which is about JFK or death, appear quite trite set in relation to the assassination of the President, but I will not digress into a detailed examination of these poems beyond what Zukofsky gives

¹⁶ In the *New York Times* reporting on the funeral, which records every imaginable detail, there is an entire article on Black Jack.

us here: the titles.¹⁷ Finally all that the poet has to offer in response to the death of JFK is poetry, and poetry for Zukofsky is necessarily affirmative. While Zukofsky is well known for writing many valentine poems, the valentine is simply a trope for any poem or any symbolic act: the desire to be with others—which is the same as “song” (or yammer). The valentine is addressed to any reader and says that the reader is a part of the poem in its reading which binds together poet and other. Zukofsky wrote numerous poems along these lines, but actually he is saying that all his poetry implicitly embodies the same impetus. Both titles indicate that the poem comes in response to or as a culmination of preceding events—in the end there is the song as the denial of death’s finality. The title, “After reading, a song,” might be understood in a number of ways, but taking it quite literally, what is left after a reading is song, that is, the focus on the individual poet in the performative reading gives way to an event in common without anyone’s name on it.

This emphasis on commonality helps explain the prominent presence of Williams, who appears both early and late in “A”-15. Williams’ funeral near the end of the movement obviously compliments and contrasts with that of JFK—it is perfectly ordinary with no special fanfare. We are even told Williams instructed Zukofsky to make no eulogy, in clear contrast with Senator Mansfield’s words for JFK. In fact there is no description of the event as such: in place of Williams’ death we are given an anecdote of his dog refusing to enter the death room, and then we find the poet in Williams’ house conjuring the older poet’s presence via memory.¹⁸ Early in “A”-15 it is mentioned that Williams was buried on a hillside in sight of a gastank, an appropriately neo-realist image for the poet of Paterson, and in the funeral passage the hillside is again mentioned, this time with the poet wondering if it is in sight of “the Erie,” meaning the Erie train terminus in Jersey City. This latter is a private association whose significance can be teased out from elsewhere in Zukofsky’s writings, but even as simply a local place name it suits the Williamsesque ambience.¹⁹ The sense of Williams’

¹⁷ As Zukofsky indicates, “Finally a valentine” was written prior to JFK’s death, and one would assume was addressed originally to Celia. Nevertheless, he did publish this poem as his contribution to an anthology of poems on JFK: *Of Poetry and Power: Poems Occasioned by the Presidency and by the Death of John F. Kennedy*, eds. Erwin A. Glikes and Paul Schwaber (1964). This poem was also published as a hand-press broadside, to which Zukofsky added a note stating that this would be the last of his short poems. While that was not literally the case, he did place the poem last in *After I’s* (1964), after which he never published any further independent short poems, and so this became the concluding poem of his collected short poems. “After reading, a song” was written just a couple weeks after JFK’s assassination as Zukofsky was riding the train back to NYC following a reading instigated by Michael Palmer, then a student at Harvard.

¹⁸ Zukofsky did not in fact go to the cemetery for the burial but apparently remained behind in Williams’ house. For Zukofsky’s account of Williams’ funeral, as well as the anecdote about Williams’ dog, see 6 March 1963 letter to Mary Ellen Solt (*SL* 290-292).

¹⁹ Both these details of the gastank and Erie had strong personal associations for Zukofsky. New Yorkers, at least, would probably be able to identify Erie as the train terminus on the Jersey side of the Hudson River which one would go through on the way to Rutherford from NYC. The association of Erie with Williams appears in “A”-8 in a context that no reader could be expected to figure out, until they read “A”-17 where the relevant line is quoted (380). All this is explained in one of Zukofsky’s critical pieces on Williams (*Prep+* 47). The gastank seems to be more broadly associated with cemeteries in Zukofsky’s mind: this juxtaposition appears in “A”-3 (1928) in relation to Ricky Chambers (10-11), and going back even further in “Poem beginning ‘The’” the poet pointedly reminds his mother of their current reality “among the gastanks” and “cemetery-tenements” (*CSP* 16). All of which

death is countered through memory, through the continuing presence of Williams in the poet, and this funeral passage ends with the poet recalling the dead voice, which implies Williams' continued existence in readers. The entire funeral passage is presented in a Williamsesque manner—not so much an attempt to imitate his style, although the descriptive manner of this passage is more generally characteristic of Williams than of Zukofsky, but the ground-level perspective and tone. If the death of Williams is a personal loss to Zukofsky in a way that cannot be the case with Kennedy, this is an indication that public events or history need to be grounded in subjective experience to have more than fetishistic significance, but this subjective experience is not merely personal but common, the historical violence and sense of loss we all know and suffer together. This, I want to argue, is the perspective and significance of Williams' poetry and why Zukofsky implies that he is America's proper poet laureate.

The public role of the poet enters "A"-15 particularly in relation to Robert Frost, who had also died the same year as Williams and Kennedy. More importantly Frost was the closest thing to a publically anointed poet laureate in America—a role that by and large he continues to occupy, along with Whitman, in the American imaginary. Zukofsky hardly needed to mention that Frost read at Kennedy's inauguration, but he does mention the President sending Frost as a special good-will envoy to the Soviet Union (360-361) and his words at a memorial service for Frost shortly before his assassination (367). Related to this topic is a mention in the Gibbon quotation that a key manifestation of civilization is the achievements of poets and philosophers (373). However, this does not amount to a criticism of Frost or Kennedy or the American public for their failure to appreciate Williams' importance because Williams' very stance both toward American society and American language renders the accolades Frost gained in late life of limited significance. Williams' presence can only be properly measured in terms of the egalitarian perspectives he made available to other poets and readers, not least Zukofsky, which far outweigh Frost's influence. One might suggest that in this regard Zukofsky was prophetic: if one took a survey of Americans generally, Frost would no doubt have the higher name recognition, but if one took a survey of poets on who has had the greater impact on American poetry, the results would likely be very different. However, the point is not a simple expression of pique at the fickleness of public judgment and recognition because Zukofsky's concern is with different senses of history and influence. If Williams' presence is under-recognized, more importantly it is operative and active in this poem. It would be perfectly legitimate to say that "A"-15 is Zukofsky's eulogy of Williams, but a eulogy in the form of a perspective and language he helped make possible rather than a conventional praising of the dead. Williams is not dead and monumentalized because he lives actively in the poetry of Zukofsky and many others, which ultimately is a traditional enough eulogistic trope.

Williams and Memory

With this in mind we can better understand the first three pages of the Kennedy segment, which as mentioned are dominated by Williams. These pages are marked off as a sub-unit by the observation that Williams did not see or live through JFK's death, which occurs with slight variations three times. The final mention adds that consequently there will be no contemporary equivalent to Whitman's poetry on the national trauma of the Civil War

indicates an association with an unprettified, working class America, and perhaps implies the question of what one can or cannot make out of such unpromising circumstances. This in any case is appropriate with reference to Williams who so stubbornly insisted on remained in and writing out of the unglamorous Rutherford.

and Lincoln's assassination. The implication, evidently, is that Zukofsky has inherited the task.

The transition from the Job passage to the Kennedy segment is abrupt as the oblique noisy composition by homophonic suggestion gives way to short lines of descriptive free verse that situate the poet at his city apartment window. This might be taken as a contemporary version of the isolate poet in his tower above the fray, but nonetheless the traffic noise comes up sounding like the wind—the whirlwind realities of the everyday bring the voice of Yahweh (or history) into the mundane. This siting of the poet, I would suggest, is itself Williamsesque—one's awareness in the here and now out of which any of us encounter the larger world and history, an event such as the death of JFK. Zukofsky never comments directly on this event nor launches into a generalized reaction to it, whether of lament, moralizing or commentary. Rather he insistently sticks to his immediate experiences of the event, via public media, and the various specific associations it evokes, mainly related either to Kennedy or Williams. It is simply an ordinary man's ordinary experience of a major public event. Who better to evoke as a poetic model in such circumstances than Williams? The opening setting with the poet at his apartment window recurs often in Zukofsky's work, but the window neither frames nor separates the poet from the outside except as a starting point for invariably the outside encompasses or absorbs the poet—or, perhaps better, the process of the poem itself absorbs what nominally begins as a description. Here, rather than the usual emphasis on looking, the poet is listening—perhaps he is listening to the noise of the Job passage as much as to the traffic below. In any case, listening is appropriate for a movement much concerned with memory, with memorializing the dead as alive. The opening setup would seem to suggest a loosely stream-of-consciousness form to contain the diversity of what follows, except that there is never any return to this setting and the poem simply spirals out or repeatedly resituates itself elsewhere. In fact, while the default assumption tends to be that the entire Kennedy section is the ruminations of the poet, there is no foregrounding of the subjectivity or personality of the poet, whose "mind" is largely a reflector of present and past elements—it is quite impossible to parse what is subjective and what comes from "outside." However, as an initial starting point, the reader is set up to take this as the consciousness of the poet, which is plausible enough for this segment covering about eight pages that keeps circling back to Kennedy. Zukofsky makes the curious point that the three deaths of Frost, Williams and Kennedy were as if "ordered," which primarily seems to mean simply that their deaths form a chronological sequence (possibility suggested by the fact the oldest died first and then the others in "proper" order), but might also suggest that it is as if some higher powers are responsible or "ordered" the deaths. But this suggestion of an orderly sequence or historical narrative—and therefore presumably a rationalization of some sort—is mentioned only to be promptly undermined in what followed, most obviously through the mechanisms of memory.

At the end of the passage on Williams' funeral late in the movement, the poet speaks of hearing Williams' voice "as *then*" (374), and this seemingly harmless phrase leads us back to the early pages of the Kennedy segment where we find an unattributed quotation in which this italicized "*then*" appears three times. The speaker of this quotation is apparently riding along and wonders how what he sees now will look when seen again sometime in the future—how will it look "*then*"? This is an acutely self-reflexive moment on a perfectly ordinary experience of time and change, and how the past continues into the present but necessarily differently. The fact that the specific object of these observations is a sign and letters is surely not happenstance, so we are also talking about reading, a repetition that always differs. Given that this quotation appears sandwiched between memories of Williams and is linked with his funeral, the reader might reasonably assume this is a remark by Williams, although in fact it comes from Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* at the moment

Raskolnikov is on his way to turn himself into the police, so the question he asks takes on a particular poignancy. Nevertheless, identifying the source is neither necessary nor expected, while its association with Williams is significant, although not necessarily speaking for him. The quotation begins with the speaker attempting to hold onto a sense of determined narrative order—in a week or a month or a... he wonders how what he sees now will appear to him—yet his very thought, which is a question, explodes the possibility that any such order as “now” and “then” can be predictably related, so “now” remembered becomes simultaneous with “then”—the word is a deictic shifter. Nonetheless, the speaker clearly feels the desire to fix this moment, to remember it as it is “now,” that is, lifted out of time, even while the very expression of this desire recognizes its impossibility. This quotation encapsulates one of Zukofsky’s most central concerns, and one could suggest it sums up the main thesis of *Bottom*. The mind’s desire to stop time, to abstract moments out of the sensual milieu of the living world is, one might say, simply inherent in the human condition, but can lead to all manner of tragic consequences. When the poet is listening at his window he cannot resist the punning observation that the parkway below is where no one can park, which suggests allegorically the flow of time or life or history in which no one can pause, even when observed or heard from above. The argument of *Bottom* is not that the abstracting mind needs to be suppressed for the sensual eye—a futile desire in any case—but that there should be a proportional dynamic balance between eye (the body, in the world) and mind. Nevertheless, Zukofsky states that Shakespeare’s perspective, with which presumably he agrees, is fundamentally tragic, regardless of genre—this proportional balance is at best only intermittently realized. Yet, for Zukofsky, this proportion (“objectification” in his earlier terminology) is the fundamental object of his work—it is the perfection it necessarily seeks.

From this perspective, oddly enough, there would seem to be an implied critique of the poet’s desire to recover Williams’ voice at the end of the funeral passage, and the reiterated “then”s of the Dostoevsky quotation might be heard as a mocking of such desire. But the quotation simultaneously expresses both the desire to hang on to the past and the impossibility of doing so—even as the speaker desires to hang onto this now, he wonders how in fact he will remember it “then.” If Zukofsky desires to conjure Williams as still alive, the latter lives on as an active presence in the poet and in this poem—not merely as a remembered figure but as integral to the poet’s seeing. This, it seems to me, is the point of the anecdote about Williams that immediately follows the Dostoevsky quotation, which begins with the poet referring to his failing eyesight that leads into a memory of Williams’ seeing. The anecdote or memory describes a visit by Williams to the Polytechnic Institute of Brooklyn, where Zukofsky taught, when the older poet noted that some heavy swinging doors in the corridor have small panes of glass to avoid pushing them into anyone coming from the other side—as is common in kitchen doors in restaurants so the waiters can see each other coming and going. Zukofsky remarks that in all these years he had never noted these panes until Williams pointed them out. In the first instance, this is merely a trite but presumably pleasant memory of Zukofsky’s recently deceased friend—all the more pleasant in that the elderly and not very healthy poet was doing Zukofsky a favor by coming to talk to his class, although this latter information is not indicated in the poem. The experience is perfectly banal: a visitor notices a detail that someone else sees everyday but fails to notice. In a sense this anecdote encapsulates a particular type of poem or Imagism for which Williams was well-known—the attention that notices a wheelbarrow or the beauty of broken glass between buildings—and so in part a tribute to his eye as well as to poetic values of importance to Zukofsky. But it is not necessarily the poet who is being privileged here, as this experience, such as it is, of renewed seeing is something that happens or can happen to any of us at any time in our everyday lives, and Williams himself says he noticed the pane merely “by chance.” In any case, “seeing” is not a simple subjective matter, rather we necessarily see

with others. This anecdote itself is presented as a memory, and seeing or not seeing is invariably bound up with memory. Zukofsky has of course seen this pane in the door, yet it has been forgotten or overlooked, faded into the blindness of routine. Poetry is in some sense fundamentally concerned with this renewal of seeing, which these days we tend to think of in terms of the renewal of language or of estrangement—a topic Williams constantly pounded away at in his critical writings. A fundamental assumption in Zukofsky's writing is that this renewal has to do with memory in the sense that language is an infinite repository of cultural labor and use, and it is by bringing possibilities always already there into the present that as far as he is concerned is the basic task of poetry. This in turn might remind us of some of Williams' best-known lines: "Memory is a kind / of accomplishment, / a sort of renewal / even / an initiation, since the spaces it opens are new places / inhabited by hordes / heretofore unrealized, / of new kinds—" (*Collected Poems* II, 245). In this anecdote, Zukofsky remembers Williams reminding him of something he had forgotten, and in doing so, Williams' eyes continue to live in Zukofsky—who, the anecdote implies, now always notices that pane in the door and associates it with Williams. This is the way memory lives in all of us. The anecdote, presented in the form of a poem, is a Williamsesque tribute to Williams—unpretentiously mundane.

A note on Bach: Interpolated near the end of the Kennedy segment is a page-length passage from Bach's biography during his Weimar period. Zukofsky incorporated segments of Bach's biography in chronological order into the successive long movements, "A"-14, -15 and -18, and there is little reason to repeat what is said in more detail in the Z-Notes commentaries on "A"-14 (forthcoming) and "A"-18, except to point out that these appear to be programmatically included into these movements without much concern as to whether they relate to other major motifs of the movements. This is an oversimplification and by this point in "A" "Bach" has accumulated a considerable constellation of significances. Although the placement of this Bach passage between Mansfield's eulogy and the funeral procession appears to deliberately interrupt the Kennedy narrative, Zukofsky does make links with the contingent materials. The passage begins with a quotation on the miracle of Bach's hands (referring to his organ playing), which follows the focal image in Mansfield's eulogy of Jackie's finger from which she slips off her ring. The passage concludes by remarking that no street is named after Bach in Weimar, which leads into the mention of the quick renaming of various public places after JFK. But these links seem arbitrary, as if to demonstrate that contiguous materials can always be made to relate. These late biographical segments do not stress specific compositions, but are a more factual portrait of a professional working musician, and in this sense present Zukofsky's non-heroic, ordinary man view of the artist/poet, as well as of history.

Coda

After the big themes and figures that dominate the movement, the brief enigmatic coda (375) seems almost deliberately trivial, but I have already argued that in "A" the trivial, like that small pane in the door, ought not to be taken lightly. The halves of this six-line stanza introduce two flowers and allude clearly if puzzlingly to the race issue that has not previously appeared in the movement, although it shows up elsewhere in "A", especially in "A"-14. "*Honesty*" and "*satinflower*" are common names for a plant (*lunaria annua*) with

round translucent pods and usually purple flowers.²⁰ These flowers are not so much images, as words as flowers that relate and bloom among or as texts. The flowers connect to the immediately following two movements, and thinking ahead to the ultimate blossoming of Zukofsky's botanical mania in *80 Flowers*, we know that flowers are words and words are sedimented with humankind's history and cultures, a bewildering tangle of botanical, etymological and textual interrelations. Botany is a particularly rich field of cultural hybridity and commingled histories.²¹ Just as many of the flowers we take to be common and native in fact have exotic origins (neither flower mentioned, as Barry Ahearn has noted, is native to North America or western Europe²²), words pursued lead everywhere, all languages intersect, all implicate each other. As Zukofsky observes in a key horse passage of "A"-12, "different" cultures intertwine and look back at each other ("A", 175).²³

The striking opening word, "*negritude*," italicized but not capitalized is unexpected. Thinking of Frank O'Hara picking up the latest issue of *New World Writing* to check out the Ghanaian poets in "The Day Lady Died," one can well imagine Zukofsky encountering the Negritude poets. However, here "negritude" has a more generic meaning, an emphasis on blackness or black African culture, but the term, strongly marked by its abstracting propensities, contrasts critically with the final italicized designations, common names for a common flower, as is "African violet." Indeed, the most obvious way to read the first half, although it may go against our natural inclination, is that it is the African violet that is not to be deferred to, but then surely the point is that no one (or word) is to be deferred to in this egalitarian vision. On the question of ethnicity, Zukofsky, who studiously avoided being identified as a Jewish poet even while he could sympathize with why some poets would want to do so, emphasizes common interrelatedness rather than ethnic distinctness.²⁴ Job too appears here somewhat unexpectedly and syntactically ambiguously in the white half of the coda. Is the suggestion that Job or the Jews are representative of the sufferings of white history? If we discern slavery behind "*negritude*," then we are likely to sense pogroms and the Holocaust behind "Job." While the larger historical concerns of the movement might support such allegorical allusions in the sense of common human suffering regardless of culture and ethnicity, this must not be at the expense of the deliberately low-key manner of the coda. It is ultimately not on the level of abstract argument that such conflicts are

²⁰ "Honesty" is also mentioned in a couple other movements of "A"; see "A"-14.356 and "A"-18.399. Michele Leggot discusses in some detail *honesty*'s appearance in "A"; see *Reading Zukofsky's 80 Flowers* (1989): 136-140.

²¹ Cf. "Lucien Febvre [...] imagined how astonished Herodotus would be if he were to repeat his itinerary today, at the flora which we think of as typically Mediterranean: orange, lemon and mandarin trees imported from the Far East by the Arabs; cactus from America; eucalyptus trees from Australia (they have invaded the whole region from Portugal to Syria and airline pilots say they can recognize Crete by its eucalyptus forests); cypresses from Persia; the tomato, an immigrant perhaps from Peru; peppers from Guyana; maize from Mexico; rice, 'the blessing brought by the Arabs'; the peach-tree, 'a Chinese mountain-dweller who came to Iran,' the bean, the potato, the Barbary fig-tree, tobacco—the list is neither complete nor closed. A veritable saga could be written about the migrations of the cotton-plant, native to Egypt from which it emerged to sail the seas." Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, Vol. II, trans. Siân Reynolds (1973): 761-762.

²² Barry Ahearn, *Zukofsky's "A": An Introduction* (1983): 139.

²³ A discussion of this passage can be found in the Z-notes commentary on "A"-12.

²⁴ On Zukofsky and Jewishness, see Z-notes commentaries on "Poem beginning 'The'" and "A"-4.

adequately overcome but in our immediate sense of living and interacting with others, which in the poem must be conveyed by the effect of the words.

The flowers of the coda, which in terms of content seems little connected with the rest of “A”-15, links with the “inequality” and flower of “A”-16 and then with the coronal and anemones (= wind flowers) of the opening of “A”-17 and that movement’s preoccupation with Williams. These three movements, then, can be considered as a Williams group within “A” and indicate how in the long run Williams was a more important figure for Zukofsky than Pound. The coda can be read as a rewriting of Williams’ red wheelbarrow poem if we take full cognizance of the first phrase of that poem and do not read it merely as a snapshot of a farm scene.²⁵ Here the pivotal phrase is not “depends upon” but “not deferred to.” Zukofsky carries the formal egalitarianism implicit in Williams’ poem into the relationship between the words, which maintain a paratactic relation to one another, that is, their syntax is flexible and open—which as I have suggested might be taken as emblematic of “A”-15’s formal presentation generally. As in Williams’ poem, the syntax progressively gives way to a nominalistic metonymy, an order of mere contiguity, which nonetheless is always framed by being in the world. As a perception, the coda requires a tolerance that allows for a liberal collocation of the verbal presentation.

Do we have here in this coda a small verbal wreath that is also a riddle intimating that in the common words and things we should recognize others, our mutual relations and entanglements? Is this Zukofsky’s answer to the seemingly universal history of violence and suffering, of which the civil rights struggle as well as Job and Jewish history are representative? The image that is implied, without quite coming into focus, is that of a garden with all its hopeful, paradisaical associations. Here different flowers or different anything can exist side by side without being out of place, as if the garden implies simply being in the world without the imposition of any abstract definitions determining what does or does not belong together. In “A”-18, Zukofsky gives a brief quotation from Walter Savage Landor where the seemingly random miscellany of rude nature nonetheless seems right, that is, “natural” (402). Complexity, including dissonance and hybridity, does not necessarily mean conflict. Job too is a figure of egalitarianism—he is stripped of all worldly pretenses that he is different or favored, so that he becomes a prototype of the human subject to all those forces of history that overpower, as well as the song of protest against such injustices. It is this level of felt commonality that enables the recognition of our inextricable interdependence.

As a conclusion to “A”-15 Zukofsky does not and cannot offer a paradisaical vision, say an image of a garden, although we perhaps come closer if we carefully sound the words, adopting a more intimate and tactile relation with them. If pronounced, the words and syllables of this coda are notably distinct, highlighting their tonal interplay—an intricate whisper of harmony. It is Zukofsky’s belief that in such close engagement with language we enact a communicative desire for and with others, where we ideally recognize and feel our mutual interrelatedness. Words connect, and in reading and writing, speaking and listening we all relate, not just with the present but with the past and future as well. The writing and reading of poetry is this “inwreathing” activity along with its centrifugal complement, “recurrence,” which is the desire to maximize this very sense of the language, of all it embodies and enacts. As the opening Job passage suggests, for Zukofsky this extends beyond a narrow conception of English to reach out to potentially any other languages, all implicit in our own.

²⁵ In *A Test of Poetry*, Zukofsky emphasizes the significance of the first four words of Williams’ poem as lifting it beyond mere pictorialism (101). This remark is quoted in “A”-17 (380).

Among the late movements of “A”, “A”-15 most directly confronts contemporary history, and as such can be seen as a complement to “A”-8 among the earlier movements. The latter is arguably the most Poundian movement of “A”, deploying collaged historical documents as an interpretive response to the sense of contemporary crisis, but as a corrective to the allegiances of the *Cantos*, “A”-8 is underwritten by Marxism and Henry Adams and scrupulously eschews mythopoetics. “A”-15 can then be read as a more radical and individual critical response to the *Cantos*, as well as to Zukofsky’s own earlier work. Now the elements no longer amount to a reading of history, except as an implied skepticism about the inevitable tendentiousness of historical interpretation. There is a deliberate looseness in the presentation of diverse materials that effectively undermines any attempt to reduce the poem to a coherent argument, to an explanatory narrative or reading of history. Instead the reader’s focus is constantly redirected toward the textual events as mediating in complex ways whatever it is we think history is. At least after World War II, Zukofsky refused to allow “history” to dominate his poem, even while history will inevitably determine the poem in every detail. His work avoids framing itself in terms of historical crisis as the justification for the poet’s authority. This is unusual in a century often depicted as a perpetual state of crisis, but Zukofsky eschewed the role of the poet as the messenger of authenticity, of dark truths, of ethical castigation in response to the dire condition of modernity. This is not because he took a particularly cheerful perspective on the history of his time. The horrors of contemporary history will inevitably make their way into the composition, but it was not his sense that that needed additional highlighting by the poet. Rather the task of poetry, as song, was to promote a complicated sense of belonging in the world with others. Therefore the trauma of Kennedy’s assassination is deflected into a common and trans-historical sense of suffering and loss that places the emphasis on our common human predicament and away from big history in the sense of specific events and individuals. While “A”-15 is the only later movement of “A” to revert to the earlier collage method and the prominent use of historical materials, the interrelations of the pieces is not merely or even primarily matters of thematic analogy but of textual dialog where everything relates. History is the stories or representations we make to explain ourselves, but these will always exclude more than they include unless we hear behind them the hurt of history that makes them necessary as symbolic acts—what they do rather than only what they say.

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