

## “the emasculated conception”: “A”-18

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“A”-18 is a forbidding poem—the darkest and most claustrophobic of the late movements of “A”. In many respects, it might be seen as the later complement to “A”-10 (1940) among the earlier movements—then Zukofsky’s despair in the face of the abject fall of France and seemingly much of the world to fascism is here echoed in response to the events of the 1960s, most obviously to the Vietnam War. The pervasive hurt of “A”-15 is at least contained by lament and the rituals of communal grieving, but in “A”-18 even the ubiquitous verbal play and jokes tend to turn nasty: “Napalm no palm, manroot / pollutes their throats” (396). This sort of black humor is unusual for Zukofsky, but in “A”-18 it persistently crops up and there is an underlying spleen that is rarely heard elsewhere in “A”. “A”-18 might be seen as a descent into the underworld, and, taking a cue from Zukofsky, I will be much concerned with the text as inhabited by ghosts. Closed related to this general mood is the movement’s shapelessness, the most blobby and congested in all of “A”. Unusually, “A”-18 and “A”-19 were more or less written at the same time in the spring of 1966, so it can hardly be happenstance that they are so formally, tonally and thematically contrasting. It is as if the predominately aesthetic concerns of “A”-19, presented in short lines and regular stanzas, attempt to compensate for the bad funk of the preceding movement.

### I

In purely descriptive terms, after an opening lyrical prelude, the main body of “A”-18 settles into an eight-word line, which is broken up into 16 very irregular chunks, ranging from a handful of lines to an 8½ page segment placed in the center and itself broken up into five paragraphs. Predominately the main body is collaged together from very small and diverse pieces of materials, but there are scattered throughout five sustained passages of quotation from specific sources: a newspaper report on a miraculous fish in Vietnam (392), extracts from Samuel Johnson’s preface to his *Dictionary* (395-396), extracts from Bronislaw Malinowski’s account of the beliefs and practices of the Trobriand Islanders concerning the spirits of the dead (399-401), a biographical passage on Bach (405) and a gathering of quotations by Jonathan Swift and the Scriblerus Club (406-407). These passages are like rafts on which one can take temporary refuge in an attempt to make some sense of the surrounding turmoil.

The bulk of “A”-18 is certainly bewildering and the verbal texture problematic. While one expects heterogeneity and obscurity, generally one can detect an underlying pulse in the long movements of “A” from the 1960s, a loose sense that the poet is talking to himself, deploying a species of stream of consciousness, even if one encounters a fair amount of interference and must get used to abrupt turns on a local level. However, in the case of “A”-18 the interference becomes overwhelming, and one is never allowed to settle into any sense of continuity, as if one small piece of material is rammed next to another giving a highly congested effect. The eight-count line is by far the longest Zukofsky ever deployed for more than brief passages, and of course the longer the word-count the more irregular the individual lines. Furthermore, his handling refuses to respect the integrity of the line unit: it serves neither as a grammatical or breath unit nor for rolling effects. If we compare Zukofsky’s earlier use of a long line—for example in sections ii and iii of “A”-13, which however do not use word-count lines—the difference is immediately apparent: “A”-18 insistently and arbitrarily breaks up the individual lines, seemingly stopping and starting anywhere. Without meter, without any consistent sense of a spoken voice, nor a recognizable use of the line as a

discrete unit, the length of the lines blots any sense of shape—which is to say it tends toward mere prose without the structuring devices of narrative or argument. On the other hand, this formal manner demands attention to small textual increments and their collocations rather than allowing overarching devices, formal or thematic, to guide the reading.

Looking closely at the text, there are numerous irregularities. Despite the adoption of an eight-word line in the main body, there are scattered odd lines (e.g. two seven-word lines appear in the first stanza and there are several irregular lines on page 406). At times the breaks between discrete bits of materials are heavily marked by punctuation, while at others the bits are simply run together resulting in seemingly indecipherable agrammatical constructions. The use of capitalization is inconsistent: the first stanza suppresses all capitalization except for two “I”s, whereas elsewhere generally, but not consistently, the beginnings of sentences are conventionally capitalized, as are usually, but not always, proper names. In a passage I will examine, virtually the only punctuation is the heavy use of the colon, which elsewhere is used in a more conventionally sparing manner. Certain lines are marked off as quotations, but sometimes in fact contain a mish-mash of materials, not necessarily quoted. On the other hand, obviously spoken lines are without quotation marks, so it is as if this often used punctuation serves more to set off certain bits of material from others than to indicate what is or is not quoted or spoken—particularly since virtually everything in “A” is in some sense quoted. One would expect, given the very irregular lengths of the stanzas, that they form self-contained units, which generally seems to be the case, except that occasionally Zukofsky spreads a quotation across the stanza break or continues with obviously related material. While one expects a degree of eccentricity in such matters, in this case Zukofsky, who was normally punctilious about punctuation, must be doing this deliberately. I will pick up later on some of these instances, but would suggest that all this manifests the pressures of disorder among which the poem must struggle to find its orders—not so much as representing or directly symptomatic of the felt disorder to the time, but as an enactment within the poem of its own intrinsic conflicts.

If the loosely collaged heterogeneity of “A”-18 represents a certain extreme, we can understand this in one sense as pursuing the linguistic egalitarianism implicit throughout “A”. One of the later stanzas of the movement is built around the “demolition” of the poet’s apartment as he and his wife prepare to move (in this case from long-time residence in Brooklyn to Manhattan), which is one possible metaphor for the text where the familiar lies in disordered disassemble and the now blank walls are estranging even while prospective apartment hunters envision new possibilities and ownership (402-403). The poet has been unhoused both physically and linguistically. A complementary stanza a couple pages later describes the objects of the presumably reconstructed household, each (it is implied) resonant with its personal associations and memories, a sense of home (404). Even here, though, the familiar also reminds the poet of the absent son (a topic to which we will return). Ghosts play a central role in this movement, as the past (the dead) and the demands of memory, as well as the associations that are the historicity and sociability implicit in all language and objects. While negativity may demolish, it allows for reconstruction and openness to the new—something we all experience in moving house. But neither “A”-18 nor “A” in general celebrate the new per se (in this sense somewhat against the grain of the 1960s), but rather textually enact the interplay between the old and the new, the old or dead and the young, the risk of disorder for the possibilities of new orders. As we will see, “A”-18 is much concerned with the problems that arise from attempting to stop this play, a denial of time and change that would impose order by repressing ghosts of various kinds. The desire for order is inherent and necessary, but merely generates more disorder and violence if it fails to recognize that orders are found within contingency and time.

The opening lines of the main body of “A”-18 (390) suggest that the poem is to be written simply as it comes—as “days live their lines” or as life becomes a notebook (or simply a note). Although enigmatically stated, this is a variation on Zukofsky’s reiterated claim that “A” is a “poem of a life” or that there is an underlying pulse beneath all that he writes or that all his works form a single poem.<sup>1</sup> This has sometimes been understood as claiming a natural, even organic grounding for his work, although this is saying no more than that the textual defines his continued existence. We will encounter “nature” as a principle of order a number of times in “A”-18, but for the urbanite Zukofsky “nature” is never simply natural: there is no organic life principle that assures order, and “nature” is always a rhetorical claim implying the equal claims of its antithesis.<sup>2</sup> Zukofsky’s concern with the quotidian is not with depicting a sense of the everyday and ordinary, which surely is not how one can plausibly characterize his writing. Rather it is simply a matter that one is “here” and writes out from within and with the materials offered by those circumstances, which is no different than what one does in ordinary living in any case. This may be one way to understand the fourth line about avoiding or no longer sensing the upper case: staying close to the ground, so to speak, an egalitarian sense of the textual presentation. But then why is this line conjoined by a colon with *iyjob* (jōb)? Job appears somewhat spectacularly with the homophonic rendition at the beginning of “A”-15, and there are scattered references elsewhere in the later “A”.<sup>3</sup> Job can be understood as expressing the human condition in the here and now—decidedly small case in a greater world that appears irrationally violent, unjust and overpowering. As the lines continue Zukofsky evokes Yahweh as surgeon and Job’s lament: “Let the day perish (*yovad yom*) wherein I was born” (Job 3:3). This certainly sets a tone and even hints that Zukofsky will play a bit of Job in what follows. If we return to the first lines, we can perhaps make some sense of the image Zukofsky interpolates within his statement about the days or life as writing: birds’ down caught in a mesh fence—an image of extreme fragility and entrapment.

The first few lines, with their mention of lines, note, notebook, upper case and even the alternative spellings of Job, are densely self-reflexive. This reflexivity is integral to the dis-ease of the text generally, the gap between lines and days, notes and life, or simply of the misfortune of being born. The rest of the stanza appears typically scattered, although perhaps we can detect some continuity in the overt prominence of signifiers that call for decoding: a Japanese flag, a penis tattooed with a name, and a recovered fragment from the Acropolis. For the time being I will leave it at that (and come back to the dirty joke later), but hopefully it is obvious one could elaborate at some length on the implications of a flag of a sun

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<sup>1</sup> The first two of these characterizations appear in the “Foreword” to “A” 1-12 (1967) (*Prep+* 228) and “A”-12 (214-215; see commentary on “A”-12). The third was reiterated almost like a mantra by Robert Creeley, who always stated it as if it came from the horse’s mouth—in any case it sounds plausibly Zukofskian; see *The Collected Essays of Robert Creeley* (1989): 10, 50, 57, 58, and Robert Creeley, *Contexts of Poetry: Interviews 1961-1971* (1973): 17, 101.

<sup>2</sup> *80 Flowers* represents something of an apotheosis of Zukofsky’s understanding of “nature”: each flower an explicit event of artifice, densely textualized. As early as “A”-2 Zukofsky is describing flowers in architectonic terms (7), which undoubtedly is indebted to Williams, most obviously “The rose is obsolete” from *Spring and All* (1923) (*The Collected Poems of WCW*, Vol. 1 (1986): 195-196).

<sup>3</sup> Other appearances are listed in the index of “A”. There is a significant passage in “A”-14 (350-351) where Zukofsky voices his doubts about the authenticity of the pious conclusion tacked onto the Book of Job, in which Job abruptly regains everything he has lost after all his suffering.

receding into a fog at sunset with residual memories of World War II or of an unearthed piece from the monument that signifies the fountainhead of classical Western culture. Suffice to say that the historical forces of disorder are evident and lead into a poem where these forces manifest themselves to an unusual degree. But the movement is less concerned with attempting to represent these forces that impinge on the poet and his poem, than with their presence in the very text itself, disrupting the poem's attempt to create some sense of measure or equilibrium. Zukofsky's response to the forces of disorder, here as elsewhere, is the inherent sociability of the poem: whatever the poem says (or any act of "language" in the broadest sense), what the poem is doing is connecting with others and in doing so is necessarily creating and perpetuating possible orders, however shadowed by the conditions of their possibility and dissolution.

## II

"A"-18 begins with a detachable lyric; indeed it was published as a poem on its own well before the bulk of the movement was composed.<sup>4</sup> *After I's*, published in 1964, was Zukofsky's last collection of short poems, and thereafter he no longer wrote stand alone short poems, or when he did, as here, he incorporated them into "A". The longer movements "A"-14 through "A"-19 (as well as "A"-22) all have what look like preludes, an opening segment that is formally set off from the main body.

The opening lyric of "A"-18 has clear parallels with "A"-11, as the poet, addressing his wife, imagines himself as dead, which gives a spectral sense to the opening line, "An unearthing" (389). As a valentine addressed to his wife (never explicitly referred to but the implied addressee within the larger context of "A"), the poet imagines her living on after his death, an existence he designates "no time" yet when her thought of him keeps him alive. The curious idea that the poet's wife lives on in "no time" means that she lives on when he is no longer in time, so it is a time that he does not experience and in that sense is no time (or eternity). This is a selfish view, as he himself says, but the poem insistently reiterates the "I" only to assert that the "I" does not exist without the "you." As a love lyric Zukofsky is simply expressing his sense of self as bound up with her, so that the thought of his death marks in one sense an absolute break between the two and yet at the same time not so as he continues to live in her as memory or in the sense that her sense of self is equally entwined with him. Thus the experience of time (mortality) is always bound up with others. This is the main idea of "A"-11. However, the death here is also the eternal gap between being and representation, where the poet's expression of love, as a text, is a form of death, but a deathliness that nonetheless lives on in the other. So, this all becomes a complicated enactment of an allegory about writing. The relationship between poet and wife is obviously enough also that between poet and text, text and reader. The numerous instances of valentines in Zukofsky's work are always figures of the poem, or ultimately any acts of language, which always express love, the desire to be with others. The poet asks in the opening stanza whether what he says now will always be said, and the answer is presumably "yes," as long as there are readers, which can be extended beyond readers of his specific texts to any reading in the sense that any text is bound up with the body of all other texts. Simply by existing one exists in the totality of existence and has had some affect that can never be entirely erased. This is a quite Spinozian perspective, which might be grounds for cheerfulness, but not necessarily so.

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<sup>4</sup> Both "An Unearthing" (the opening lyric of "A"-18) and "I Sent Thee Late" (which we will get to in a moment) were published in very small editions (77 copies of the former and just 20 of the latter) by hand-press at Harvard Yard in 1965. This opening lyric is dated 26 Dec. 1964, whereas the bulk of "A"-18 was composed in March-April 1966, so the dates of 1964-1966 given in the table of contents to "A" are technically correct but a bit misleading.

Similarly, the “unearthing” of the opening line means in the first instance memory or the recovery of the past, but will be extended into a mediation on the poet’s death (physical earth) and in what sense he nonetheless continues to live (is unearthed). This complex has actually been at the heart of Zukofsky’s concerns since very early and also relates to writing-reading as an act of unearthing, the transformation of the merely material and inert (earthy texts) into something unearthly. As we will see, various implications of “unearthing” will be developed in “A”-18 but the essential idea is being with others. The figure of the poet and wife moving with and around each other, so to speak, displaces the singular “I.” This broadened out becomes paradigmatic of our relations with others, with texts, with the past, which are all present yet which we tend to repress. Therefore the need to unearth and acknowledge the ghostly presences with which “A”-18 is much concerned, which represent not merely the dead past but the latent future, the as-yet-unrealized possibilities (in Canto I Odysseus visits the realm of the dead not to learn about the past but about the future).

The fact that this prelude is in the genre of a love lyric (a valentine) implicates gender relations, and there is a critique of masculinity throughout this movement. The male poet is dependent on the female beloved/reader both for the composition of the poem (necessarily implying others, a language shared and interwoven with others) and its afterlife. As mentioned, the poet notes the selfishness of wanting the beloved to live on after him and for him to live on in her, but then that very confession of egotism acknowledges his dependence and the fragility of the masculine “I.” We will see that “A”-18 is much concerned with an implied critique of male assertiveness or the isolate ego and its delusions, which is counter-balanced by the acceptance of others and ghosts, our necessary existence with and in others, not least the others of the past and future. But the male ego is not simply something that characterizes other people—generals, politicians, sailors, etc.—since it is also an inevitable temptation of the (male) poet and his grandiose ambitions and pronouncements. Persistently throughout Zukofsky’s work Celia is a figure who helps keep the poet’s feet on the ground, who often humorously punctures the more flamboyantly self-involved temptations of the poet—a topic to which we will return.

The lyrical prelude is connected with a moment early in the main body of the movement that prints a youthful poem of Zukofsky’s, “I Sent Thee Late.” As we are told, Celia herself requested that this poem, written when the poet was 18, be preserved.<sup>5</sup> In this sense the poem is unearthed by Celia, but also it so happens that this poem explicitly evokes the grave and passing time, so there is another sense of unearthing. The poem is unearthed and preserved by being written entire into “A” as part of a stanza that primarily deals with Zukofsky’s early poetry. This is not the first time Zukofsky includes old work in “A”, most obviously in the catalog of still-born works in “A”-12 (251-260). In the case of “I Sent Thee Late,” there is a complicated set of relations put into play. This title was not originally given to the poem but added in honor of Celia, since it is a phrase quoted from a well-known lyric by Ben Jonson, which we will not be surprised to be reminded simply has the title, “To Celia” (“Drink to me only with thine eyes”). The title phrase is taken from the latter half of the poem, and as a sort of gist of the whole Zukofsky also quotes five key words (a sixth, “honor,” also echoes Jonson’s poem) (390). In Jonson’s poem, the poet gives a wreath to his beloved, not to honor her but for her to renew by breathing on it, which she returns to the

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<sup>5</sup> This poem, without the title, was preserved in a carefully arranged typescript of a selection of early poems from circa 1920-1924 entitled *The First Seasons*. This gathering is dated in Zukofsky’s hand 23 Jan. 1941, and he notes that it was not to be published, indicating that it may have resulted from a clearing out operation of his earlier papers. The date is in fact Zukofsky’s birthday, the second year of his marriage, and I would guess that Celia largely or entirely chose, arranged and typed this selection as a present.

poet for him to discover that not merely is it refreshed but it retains her smell (breath). The relation of this typical conceit with the opening lyric is obvious, as is the allegory of poem (wreath) and reader (beloved). In choosing the phrase as a title, the “thee” refers simultaneously to Celia, poem and reader, and the “late” can also be understood in the sense that this is a late unearthing of this old poem which has been breathed on and renewed by Celia/the reader. Zukofsky is recovering a quasi-obsolete sense of “late,” as meaning recently (lately)—late is not too late. Zukofsky finds irresistible the idea that a poem written long before he ever met Celia, becomes a poem addressed to her, which is the first sense of the title he then adds. This is an example of how the seeming randomness of life finds its orders which is a constant process of reworking past materials and finding relations.

While the title is explained as an elaborate allusion to and unearthing of Jonson’s poem, it functions as a dedication rather than signaling the topic of the poem itself, which in many senses is the negation of all that seems implied by the allusion to Jonson. The poem as written by the young Zukofsky is obviously indebted to one of the most famous pessimistic poems in the language, Mathew Arnold’s “Dover Beach.” Zukofsky tries for something of the onomatopoeic effect of Arnold’s famous grating sound of the sea surge on a pebbly beach as an image of inexorable time and absolute materialism. Zukofsky imagistically emphasizes the sense of empty repetitive (rote) time and death—restless change is nothing but meaningless repetition. The heavy repetition of “grave” relates it to unearthing but here in its negative, futile sense—and therefore is appropriate for the mood of this movement. But then this also suggests that the grave mood of “A”-18 is not merely to be attributed to the specific time when the poem was composed, but is something that has been present in Zukofsky all along. This might be better expressed by saying it is always latent within poetry, language and history that the poem attempts to a greater or less degree to keep at bay—the anti-poem. When Celia saves this poem and Zukofsky gives it its title, he in effect completely rewrites it so that the original bleakness is deflected toward and in the eyes of she who matters most to him and in whom he can recognize his othered self. However, the optimistic essence of any poem, no matter how bleak, is that it seeks readers, so here the title acknowledges the poem’s success. And the long career of the poem—forgotten but eventually unearthed—is an apt emblem of Zukofsky’s own career by the later 1960s. Yet this rewriting in no way erases the mood of the original poem, and therefore the new poem encapsulates the tension that underlies “A”-18 generally, which might be figurally emblemized as Celia versus the void. At least for the moment in “A”-18 the more positive re-writing/reading seems to momentarily work, as it is immediately followed by the fending off of death (since as Wittgenstein says in the *Tractatus* death is not lived through (qtd. *Bottom* 83, 98)) and a turning toward more cheerful images of marriage and flowers (poems, anthology < Gk. a gathering of flowers), and the stanza ends with the poet suggesting he will live together with Celia to be at least 90.

In between he unearths another old poem, “For a Thing by Bach,” quoting the gist of its final stanza (of four) in truncated form.<sup>6</sup> This poem appears to be a free translation or imitation of a cantata by Bach, which is to say it is a poem in praise of God. This is certainly one counter to the other poem, and even represents the very faith whose eclipse motivated Arnold’s great poem. Zukofsky of course has no interest in religion here but rather in the possibilities of poetry, and whatever the limited merits of his Bach poem, it does at least draw on a vast tradition of poetic assertion of hope. A few phrases of this poem (included here as well) were used in “Poem beginning ‘The,’” which Zukofsky suggested to Pound were the seed for “A”—presumably meaning the hint of the Bach theme to be developed on a grand scale in the latter poem (*EP/LZ* 79, 83). Many years later in 1962, Zukofsky met by chance Delmore Schwartz who to his amused horror told him that this old Bach poem, which

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<sup>6</sup> Published in *Pagany* 1.4 (Oct-Dec. 1930): 23.

Zukofsky published but never reprinted in book form, had inspired his own recent experiments with a longer line (*SL* 288-290). Zukofsky added that he hoped this old poem never escaped from its forgotten obscurity, but now, a few years later, he seems to have somewhat rethought the matter and found some value in this unearthing. If nothing else, he is no doubt thinking back to what set off the long labor of “A” in the first place. The earlier early poem, “Vast, tremulous” (“I Sent Thee Late”), certainly looks like a more probable seed for Zukofsky’s subsequent poetic trajectory but the old Bach poem offered an enduring and emblematic topic for “A” and the affirmative impetus of the tradition of praise poetry was also important to him. The last couple of lines of this stanza therefore accept that the petals will fall but that living will make its senses. There is a quiet echo of *Hamlet* here in the words, “let be,” often quoted in both “A” (397, 554) and *Bottom* (106, 152, 302). This remark by Hamlet, as a classic victim of over-cerebration, serves Zukofsky as a prompt to go back to the work of the poem rather than be caught up in unanswerable philosophical quandaries. The fact that this is an allusion to Hamlet, of course indicates this is never so easy but it is Zukofsky’s insistence.

### III

Although the poem as unearthing is full of ghosts, there are some quite literal appearances of the dead in “A”-18, the most significant a long passage paraphrased and quoted from the anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski on the practices of the people of the Trobriand Islands (Papua New Guinea) that I will examine in a moment. Another interesting instance is a cluster of brief quotations from a Henry James story, “Maud-Evelyn” (401), speaking of people who “live for memory,” for whom the past is literally present. In the middle of these snippets, Zukofsky interpolates, “I read there / he plays here,” which can be understood literally as what he is doing while presumably Paul plays his violin, but which, particularly given the inversion of the expected deictic terms, also suggests the displacement of reading. “He” could be Henry James and from there one can fill in any number of possibilities, but in any case it indicates the sense of the presence of others and the incalculable affect the non-present, including the dead, have on us—not least in the act of reading.<sup>7</sup>

The long passage quoted from Malinowski (399-401) is entirely concerned with the *baloma* or the spirits of the dead, but has a different focus in each of its two halves.<sup>8</sup> The first

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<sup>7</sup> Henry James was probably the novelist Zukofsky most admired and over 40 of his books were in the family library. The scattered quotations from James throughout Zukofsky’s works almost always concern ghostly presences (examples would include quotations from “The Altar of the Dead” in “A”-11.124.9, from an essay, “Is There Life After Death,” in “A”-13.265.13-21 and “A”-22.534.15, from the story “The Tone of Time” in “A”-14.317.29-318.18 and from “The Birthplace” in *Bottom* 99-100). “Maud-Evelyn” (1900) has a complicated self-reflexive structure. There is a couple whose adolescent daughter, the Maud-Evelyn of the title, has died, but they continue to live as if she is present. The narrator telling the story to a group of friends never meets this couple, so the facts of the tale are mediated through two younger characters who are drawn into the world or drama of the couple living as if their daughter is still among them. The narrator, standing in for the reader, is skeptical and actually foregoes the opportunity to meet the couple, yet in telling the story is in fact conjuring the presence of the daughter. This hardly exhausts the complications but indicates the self-reflexivity that clearly interested Zukofsky and the manner in which memory pervades our present, even indirectly.

<sup>8</sup> Zukofsky draws on two long essays by Malinowski, “Myth in Primitive Psychology” (1926) and particularly “Baloma; the Spirits of the Dead in the Trobriand Islands” (1916), which he

half deals with interactions of the *baloma* with the living and their return to their home villages on a specific day each year, while the latter half concerns the Trobrianders' belief in a form of reincarnation: having no concept of the male role in conception, they believe that the *baloma* grow old and at a certain point desire to be reborn, so they impregnate a female by literally inserting themselves into her. The relation of all this to the theme of unearthing is obvious enough and to Zukofsky's practice of consciously writing by recycling, of renewing or breathing new life into past work and the broader concern with the sense of living and laboring with the past and the future in the present. As Zukofsky's excerpts clearly indicate, although the Trobrianders recognize the everyday presence of the spirits of the dead, their relationships with them are not without tension. The tale that explains why the spirits are invisible to the living (the story of the eyes of the coconut) is obviously enough a myth of repression, of the fear or unease with the dead and the desire to ignore or forget them, to simply be independent of them. Similarly there is the understandable wariness of young women vis-à-vis the often tricky means by which the *baloma* implant themselves in the womb.

In the first instance, this Trobriand passage helps to expand the unearthing trope from the primarily lyrical and subjective perspective of the prelude into a more social and cultural context. The anthropological discourse, which Zukofsky substantially replicates, invariably tends toward universalization, the "primitive" as a model for the human generally, even if this is couched in terms of the "other" that necessarily implicates the non-other. It is notable that he reproduces a good many Trobriand words and phrases, which follows Malinowski, who as a functionalist insists that language can only be properly understood as social acts in specific cultural contexts and therefore is not translatable literally. These words gesture at otherness even while they are contextualized and assimilated in terms of ourselves. Generally speaking Zukofsky was not attracted to primitivism or mythopoetics (so important in the modernism of his youth as well as among many younger poets in the 1960s) as the grounds for the authentic against which to measure the contemporary world. In his view, it is not a matter of the "primitive" being repressed and in need of unearthing to counter the cultural fragmentation of modernity, even though the "primitive" can function as a useful critique of the modern. We might recall Zukofsky's often noted remark dismissing modern poetry's need for myth when there is enough "epos and historical destiny" to be found in a consideration of the words "the" and "a" (*Prep*+ 10). This gesture is itself demystifying in turning from the search for authentic prototypes to their mediation, while simultaneously suggesting that the defamiliarizing of the familiar and close-to-hand will spin out all the myths and prototypes that we need: those ghosts (histories) everywhere haunting our words. Zukofsky does not choose to present the Trobrianders as some unrepressed ideal (Wilhelm Reich extensively used Malinowski's work to underwrite his theories of sexual liberation). Their uneasy relationship with the dead is our own, is in fact the unease implicit in figuralism or representation, which simultaneously brings to focus and dissolves. Nevertheless, their myths, rituals and indeed their entire social order indicate that the Trobrianders do at least recognize and attempt to accommodate the spirits of the dead.

The function of this passage within the larger context of "A"-18 is to suggest that war, violence and trauma are related to the effort to ignore and repress the dead. This is the point of the seemingly odd interpolation at the beginning of the Trobriand passage of a boy's sense

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almost certainly found collected together in the volume *Magic, Science and Religion and Other Essays*, ed. Robert Redfield (1948). Both essays are based on the seminal fieldwork Malinowski carried out among the Trobriand people during World War I, on which he based his classic works *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922) and *Coral Gardens and Their Magic* (1935).

of shame on learning of the pain of childbirth and hating men's role in impregnation (also referred to as "A"-14.335). This moment of lost innocence, a recognition of suffering, is turned into hatred of its reputed cause, which would presumably include the boy's father and even himself, but then becomes projected across larger cultural and historical narratives. This mention of the boy and his sense of shame is included in the same "sentence" with references that tie the entire Trobriand passage to the Vietnam War, which is the leading current event of the movement.<sup>9</sup> Zukofsky mentions the indiscriminate destruction of villages and refers specifically to a well-known TV report by Morley Safer in August 1965 on the torching of Cam Ne village by U.S. soldiers while the helpless villagers looked on, including an instance of a Marine setting a hut on fire with a zippo lighter (this footage can be found on YouTube). The manner in which Zukofsky chooses to start off the Trobriand passage indicates less a specific condemnation of this war than the war as a manifestation of the failure to recognize the other, the repression of the other as oneself. This link in turn echoes the first mention of Vietnam in the movement as a whole, which is introduced with a headline followed by quotations from the newspaper article about an indestructible fish, believed to be a Buddhist manifestation. Although this is taken straight from the *New York Times*, the article is notably folkloric and its social symbolism is quite explicit: the fish represents a nativist resistance (marked Buddhist) against the repression of a colonial proxy government (marked Catholic) with the aid of American military advisors.<sup>10</sup> The darkly humorous attempts to destroy the fish indicate the persistence of the other, most obviously because it is us. The account of course can be taken as a tribute to native resistance and even as prophetic, especially if correlated with sound bites elsewhere by American military leaders claiming they have the Viet Cong on the run (398). There is also the mention that American involvement is merely the stupid perpetuation of a previous French war (398). But again it seems to me that despite the obvious pot-shots at the various American directors of the war in Vietnam, protesting the war is not an important element of "A"-18's task, in the first place because this would require the presumption of critical distance that the poem seems determined to undermine. Ultimately these fears and repressions infect us all, or perhaps more to the point they inhabit our language—what are the implications of the distinction between "the" and "a"? (for some answers to this question, see the commentary to "A"-22 & -23). As I have suggested, it is this inhabitation that determines the manner of "A"-18 and its attempt to enact the play of order and disorder, of recognition and repression. The torching of villages is immediately preceded by the climactic reference to the war and its affects, the self-immolation of three anti-war protesters, which not only literally brings the horrors of the war onto home soil but the poet says scorched "my love"—a rare, perhaps unique instance in "A" of the violence of the outside world penetrating into the heart of the poet's family (399).<sup>11</sup> These self-immolations set off a whole series of burnings that culminate in the boy's "burning" hatred of fathers.

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<sup>9</sup> All the long movements of the 1960s include a fair amount of scattered mentions of current news, but in those of the mid-decade Zukofsky highlights a particular event or issue over others: in "A"-14 the race issue and civil rights struggle, in "A"-15 the assassination of President Kennedy and in "A"-18 the Vietnam War.

<sup>10</sup> One of the few changes Zukofsky makes in quoting from the article, other than the usual deletions for the sake of condensation, is to make explicit that the American is a military aide, whereas in the newspaper report there is simply the presence of an unidentified American who presumably is one of the sources of the report.

<sup>11</sup> These self-immolations all took place in 1965: Alice Herz (16 March) the older lady whose name was hushed, Norman Morrison (2 Nov.) at the Pentagon, and Roger Allen LaPorte (10 Nov.) in front on the United Nations building in NYC. These acts of protest emulated similar self-immolations by a number of Buddhist monks in South Vietnam in 1963, alluded to in

As mentioned, the latter half of the Trobriand passage concerns beliefs about conception and concludes on the role of fathers. Although males have no part in conception and in that sense there is no concept of illegitimacy or paternity, nonetheless fathers play an important role in the child's sense of belonging as emblemized in the concluding image of the father taking the child in his arms (401). In the (by Western standards) casual relationships of the Trobrianders, marriage is simply a matter of cohabitating, which can be terminated by either party at any time, so the concept and role of the "father" in this culture is precarious, yet a "fatherless" child is recognized as disadvantaged. The Trobriand conception of "fatherhood" helps to socially demystify our own, with its focus on biology and "blood," and this relates to the earlier reference to the shame of the son, which could not occur or at least not in this manner in Trobriand culture. The son of course is Paul and so these reflections on fatherhood implicate the poet himself, but this in turn ought to be understood figurally as another variation on unearthing: the relation between father and son, old and young—the extent to which the son is or is not the father. The son's shame that manifests itself as hatred of fathers was obviously a major topic of the times, and the younger generation's accusations against the older for its part in the recent history of wars, materialism and the like. This accusation is explicitly voiced near the end of the movement (406), which I will return to below. In a strictly biographical sense, what underlies much of this is simply the fact that Paul (in his early 20s at the time) has left home. This manifests itself in the poem with the recurrent appearance of various fractions always based on 3 (391, 401, 402). It is not always easy to make local sense of these fractions, but the fact that they are always based on three clearly indicates the reference to the Zukofsky family unit and the fact that they are fractions indicates its fractioning. The motif of the missing son culminates in an unusually clear anecdote near the end where the poet returns home at midnight to a phone call from the son, who we are told has been out of touch for two months, but only because he has a favor to ask—exactly what we are not told (405).<sup>12</sup> The point is not, as I understand it, a reprimand of the son, but rather the reluctant acceptance that the son does after all grow up and pursue his own life, and so the role of "father" changes. In one sense the father is now in the position of the young son on learning about the suffering of childbirth: his own sense of pain or neglect could be channeled into resentment toward the son, but this is finally to perpetuate that repression of time and change, of growth and renewal, of the need for unearthing.

A page following the Trobriand passage there appears the phrase "the emasculated conception" (402), which at least in one sense seems irresistibly to refer to the Trobrianders' beliefs about conception, in which male participation is absent. The phrase obviously encrypts "immaculate conception," which might be another way to understand the Trobrianders' beliefs on such matters, as well as being a conception of feminine power. This phrase is immediately followed, joined by a colon, with a famous quip by W.C. Fields to the effect that any man who hates children and dogs can't be all bad. This is a typical bit of machismo humor that is not really funny and can be related to the assertive, often darkly humorous assertions of American military leaders. Fields' quip is counterbalanced by several lines of quotation by Walter Savage Landor (who Zukofsky likes to refer to simply as Savage) that precede and seemingly sit in apposition to the phrase "the emasculated conception." The quotation asserts the egalitarian character of "nature," where the observer is on the same level with the object and the higgledy-piggledy juxtaposition of things

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"A"-15 (365), which are related to the Buddhist fish story in that these monks were also protesting against the persecution of Buddhists by the Catholic dominated government.

<sup>12</sup> There is a stanza break at the page break, so that this five line anecdote of the son's phone call stands on its own.

nevertheless seems right, that is, “natural.”<sup>13</sup> “Nature” here is the principle of being in the world where the observer and things observed are non-hierarchically sited. Reading this as in apposition with “the emasculated conception” recalls the “Objectivist” principle of “thinking with things” (*Prep+* 12) or, in the case of “A”-18, allowing the diverse bits of textual materials to lie together in the space of the poem without being over-mastered, but interrelated and actively defining each other. This means the ghosts in the texts are allowed to come forth in their bewildering babble, diverse registers and tones, and in so doing persistently jostle and reflect back on each other since there is no assertive center around which they are organized. Such an emasculated text therefore constantly turns on or reframes itself, drawing forth further senses and possibilities (*baloma*), whose ultimate message is this infinite sociability, that we are linguistically all actively bound together with the past and future as well as with each other. Here fatherhood in the conventional patriarchal sense makes little sense, and if poets are fathers then it is because they care for their children who manifest the spirits of the dead and the potential for the future.

#### IV

So far I have clung to or circled around a number of those rafts that “A”-18 offers in order to identify organizing metaphors and themes for the poem, but it is necessary to step into deeper waters. The bulk of “A”-18 is a turbid mass, as previously described, consisting of small bits of very diverse textual matter—not simply various in terms of apparent subject matter but in register and provenance. However, we might quickly note two compositional processes that do not appear in “A”-18 but are found elsewhere in the later movements: there is almost no use of homophonic translation, such as from the Book of Job in “A”-15 and throughout both “A”-22 & -23 as well as *80 Flowers* (there is an 11-word exception from Catullus 5 on page 393), nor are there passages stitched together from bits of a single source but not presented as a pastiche of quotations, such as the use of Aristotle in “A”-13, Milton in “A”-14 or Isaak Walton in “A”-21. Both these compositional techniques are usually lyrical in intent, efforts to make the materials sing with little concern about the original semantic sense. In “A”-18, on the other hand, the individual textual bits (aside from those agrammatical examples) tend to make transparent, albeit elliptical, sense, but the problem is their lack of referential context and how they collocate. A high proportion of the textual bits are sound bites from mass media, as well as jokes and the usual familial quips, which gives the impression of babble, the incongruent and often distorted noises that bombard the poet in his urban environment in a stormy time.

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<sup>13</sup> The reader is invited to consider the original passage from which Zukofsky has extracted his quotation in the long essay, “The Poems of Catullus” (also used in *Bottom* 111). Landor is being ironic, explaining a ruder more “rustic” aesthetic taste, which is incapable of appreciating a more rigorous and “higher” aesthetic—specifically he has in mind Catullus 63, the Alexandrian style poem on Attis who is quite literally (self-)emasculated. As Zukofsky presents his quotation, it is stripped of its original irony and the sentiment expressed is consistent with long held beliefs. This is one of innumerable examples indicating that one cannot treat quoted material in “A” as allusions, but rather they are materials to be used for Zukofsky’s own purposes. This Landor quotation as it appears in “A”-18 can be usefully put alongside Zukofsky’s one paragraph preface to a selection of poems made by Celia, *Found Objects* (1962), in which he evokes Spinoza’s “nature as creator” and speaks of looking on his own works as if they were found objects that arrange themselves as if naturally (*Prep+* 168). See also a remark by the photographer Edward Weston incorporated into “A”-12 about discovering things in nature already composed (251).

In a moment, I want to look in detail at the first paragraph of the long 8½ page section at the heart of “A”-18. This is where the movement gets darkest and densest, a seemingly random agglutination of bits and pieces, although there are two sustained passages of quotation from Samuel Johnson and from Malinowski. There are a few lines taken from a news report of an old man climbing to higher ground to escape floods who hears voices below him while his house is “spirited away” (394). By now we should be attuned to these ghostly voices and recognize these floods as meta-textual: an apt description of much of the surging textual surface of “A”-18, as well as evoking the general tone of disaster. If this reader is unhoused and seeking higher ground to gain an overview, at the same time specific voices call to him demanding recognition for their specificity. Zukofsky’s quotations from the preface to *A Dictionary of the English Language* tend to describe language in similar terms, as Johnson admits the inherent limitations if not impossibility of his great effort to codify English. Johnson adopts a whole string of figures, increasingly social and ominous, to depict his effort to monumentalize the language: as embalming, imposing legal restraints, enchainning and lashing syllables into submission. Tellingly Johnson mentions that one of his self-imposed rules is to draw on no living author for his definitional examples, even while admitting he was unable to strictly abide by this resolution. The conception of a living and unbounded language that Johnson laments is of course for Zukofsky a fundamental enabling principle: language as coterminous with any human’s efforts to realize themselves in the world. In *Thanks to the Dictionary* Zukofsky had humorously exploded the conception of the dictionary as in any sense definitive or limiting—aware that dictionaries cannot define words but only give examples. Yet to say that Zukofsky is using Johnson ironically to proclaim his avant-garde credentials hardly seems satisfactory, particularly within the troubled context of “A”-18. The desire Johnson expresses is real enough and can be understood as the unease of figuration, the relentless swarming of those ghosts, which are far easier to welcome from the higher ground of abstract principle than in the concrete instances of the everyday. From this perspective we do not require contemporary history to explain the high proportion of seemingly chaotic and spleenish textual surface in “A”-18, but rather this is a quotient of the order-disorder integral inherent in any text. The flood of textual heterogeneity in “A”-18 is neither simply a principle of liberating potentialities, of making it new, nor symptomatic of the poet’s sense of the disorder of his times, but it is the play of such binaries.

Predominately it is as if the textual surface of “A”-18 allows the ghosts to surge forth. When the poet declares in the opening lines of the main body that he will simply allow the “days to live their / lines” (390), this is anything but a simplification of the writing method; rather everything potentially comes into play, and this may be another way to understand the image of the mesh fence with bits of bird’s down: a sense of helplessness in containing the welter. We have the curious part-line, “yahweh the surgeon a surge on,” a punning conflation of the ultimate but perhaps unseeable principle of order—both a cutter and a mender—with a well-nigh nominalistic commotion of the everyday and of figuration. The appearance of *the*, definite article implying a singular instance, is immediately countered by *a*, implying other equal instances. This opening stanza ends with the shattered Acropolis and broken image of Athene, another emblem of singular cultural and historical order now considerably decomposed. Its “debris” is what we inherit out of which we will compose our own lives, not least our images of the past. Then follows possibly the most puzzling part-line in the entire movement: “forgive: I don’t recall names: rote” (390). “Rote,” a word that crops up a number of times in the later Zukofsky, suggests mechanical recall or repetition, as if the poet merely repeats.<sup>14</sup> Repeats what? Words first of all and the ghosts within them. One way to read this

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<sup>14</sup> Perhaps the most emphatic appearance of “rote” is in “A”-21 (474), where Zukofsky also plays on the word’s three main meanings: mechanical repetition, a fiddle, and the surge of the

line is as an apology for not naming all of his sources since he cannot remember or in fact be conscious of most of them, and so in that sense he is merely writing by rote. This is the case with any writers who are simply the sum or effect of their sources, which chimes with the dedication of “Poem beginning ‘The’” to anyone the poet has forgotten (*CSP* 8). If we wanted to recall a relevant name here, then Spinoza springs to mind, who for all his talk of gaining freedom over the emotions and achieving an “intellectual love of God” (a phrase Zukofsky never uses) was an absolute determinist and delighted in demystifying the illusion of human will. From this perspective any poet merely writes by rote, mechanically reproducing according to their nature as determined by their immanence in the totality, and the appearance of individual order and style, the artist as god or singular originator, is smoke and mirrors. The point is that to an unusual degree, “A”-18 risks allowing textual detritus to dominate, which in a curious way puts the reader in the position of being the emasculating conceptor attempting to invent or impose a unifying principle of order. But actually the reader is most likely to feel the dis-ease of figuration, which I believe is the intention.

Turning to a closer examination of the first paragraph of the long central segment (393-395), a feature that sticks out is the heavy use of colons—virtually the only form of punctuation used, so that the entire one and a half page paragraph is punctuated as a single agglutinative sentence. While generally the colon appears to mark the border between distinct bits of textual material, this is not consistently the case and as so often in this movement it is not clear that there is a definite principle underlying its use. Elsewhere in the movement, the colon appears more or less conventionally, even though the combination of pieces of materials appears just as miscellaneous and haphazard as in this paragraph. The colon suggests a relational procedure: this equals that..., or, this follows that... Used so ubiquitously the colon tends to suggest that the pieces relate backwards as well as forwards, breaking down the usual implication of primary and secondary relations. The assumption is that everything relates, and over the course of his career Zukofsky would push the implications of this axiom ever more radically, trusting that the heterogeneity of his texts would find their orders. Similarly, the seemingly discrete movements of “A” also immanently create their various connections, even create their various readings for various readers. The colon is then simple one way to indicate this relation/difference principle, which can be extended to all punctuation, or grammar and syntax, or words and even letters. Where we do or do not link and divide determines the reading and the possibilities of reading. Elsewhere in the movement one encounters the complementary situation where there is no punctuation at all between the initial capital letter and the terminal period, other than spaces between words. Consequently the words appear agrammatically strung together, usually resulting in incomprehensibility, although that is actually a question of establishing a syntax and no collocation of words is intrinsically unreadable. As already suggested, the refusal to establish a consistent punctuation usage can be understood as marking the play between where we do and do not draw distinctions, what we join together or keep separate—a play that is constitutive of any writing and reading.

Zukofsky begins the paragraph by evoking the scene of writing, in this case by observing that he is not efficient, only observant, that he simply writes eight-word lines without a prayer and so on. There are any number of such setting gestures (here and now) scattered throughout the movements from the opening of “A”-12 onward, and we have already noted the instance that begins the main body of “A”-18 itself. On the one hand, these gestures tend to claim variations on the general insistence that poetry is quotidian, a natural manifestation of the activity of living. This is Zukofsky’s long held rejection of the poet as

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sea—this latter is clearly relevant to the “surge on” here in “A”-18 and to the dominate image of waves pounding the beach in “I Sent Thee Late” that follows shortly after.

heroic (or heroically anti-heroic), or a touchstone of authenticity, or a figure of superior sensibility and so on. The poem exists as immanent in the world as the poet lives it. The poetry of living is not primarily a matter of allowing the ordinary to dominate the content or creating a verisimilitude of the mundane, but the active negotiation of the heterogeneity of the everyday where the radically miscellaneous nonetheless somehow must relate. The self-reflexivity of these opening gestures means that if poetry is a natural manifestation of living then its self-consciousness is the awareness and activation of living's figuralness, which is often understood as anti- or counter-natural. The activation of the figuralness of the textual surface implies that a given bit of textual material is never simply there, but always elsewhere as well and available for any number of recontextualizations. Thus there remains a persistent sense of unease, of relations and potential orders. One consequence of all this is the tendency for pieces of the text to become readable as meta-commentaries or textual allegories. This does not exactly overcome the reigning disorder, except perhaps in the sense that reflection on the disorder becomes the ordering topic, but in this case remaining a predominately disordered *darstellung* or presentation.

Let's examine the four and a half lines immediately following what I designated the opening setting gesture (393). First we have a child, presumably an infant attempting to speak. The figure of the child in Zukofsky's work often represents a linguistically pre-socialized state of being, where "language" is fluid and visceral. Here the infant's articulations are clearly enough a recognition of the world to which it happens to be deictically pointing. This is reinforced when we recognize the appearance of "eye(s)" in its inarticulateness, that compulsive figure in *Bottom* of our sensual relation with and in the world. The implication of this snapshot is that the recognition of the world and the moment of articulation are simultaneous, indeed the same act, to which Zukofsky adds four words that by now should resonate for the careful reader of "A": "intentions blaze *light lights*." The last two words quote from the invocation and envoi of "A"-8 (43, 104-105), where vision is primarily of labor, the recognition of the dialectical interaction with the world everywhere in evidence. "Intentions" simply reiterates Zukofsky's frequent insistence that our being, acting, thinking in the world is never disinterested, and what we are always about is recognizing and enacting orders, relations that light up, above all relations with others which are necessarily implied in any articulation or text. If on the one hand we have here the natural infant, the proto-poet poeticizing as an act of living in and with the world, on the other hand the figure as it appears here in the poem is precisely that, a figure that reflects back and within the poem, which does not cancel out but replicates the spontaneous act of the infant and so on.

I have always read the next two lines as stabs at definitions of the form of "A" itself, although there is no reason to limit oneself to such a specific reference. One might paraphrase these lines in a number of ways, but the idea of order as a matter of breaks and linkages seems clear enough. The "An" is the main clue indicating these lines refer to "A" in that all movements from "A"-14 onward were to begin with "an." An implication of the indefinite article here is that there is no specific and determinative origin or telos, which obviously enough is relevant to "A" but is also true of Zukofsky's view of history and narrative generally.<sup>15</sup> Although I naturally tend to read this "An" with the rest of its line, encouraged by the fact that this set of lines seems, unusually for "A"-18, to recognize the integrity of the line as a unit, nevertheless we have here a case of those aberrant colons which also set off the "An" on its own. Does this "An" go with the preceding (and following "chain" perhaps read as "and," a link) or is it simply on its own, as we find in the case of a couple other words in this paragraph? For present purposes I will simply point out that these statements on form or

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<sup>15</sup> For further remarks on the distinction between "a" and "the" in relation to these two lines, see the commentary on "A"-22 & -23.

order (if that is what they are) are in fact by more conventional criteria the embrace of disorder, a refusal to allow abstract frameworks to regulate the sensuous particulars. But as already argued it is Zukofsky's assumption that relations will always "blaze" between particulars and form any number of constellations.

The next line proposes a story or narrative, which I have just suggested is an organizational principle Zukofsky usually avoids. The logic of this narrative is in the first instance nothing more than the close similarity of the words "pogrom" and "program," so the narrative logic, if we can call it that, is of a different order and involves the inexhaustible relations between words or even letters, not least their aural similarities. The narrative order may be nothing more than that of a dictionary. Mention of a "fiddler" usually designates Paul, but actually also refers to the poet or to anyone as they live their lives, making out of the world and materials at hand (fiddling and weaving (textualizing) are often equated). As Zukofsky insisted, "A" and the rest of his work was the story of his life, not as a conventionally understood autobiographical narrative but as the made work registering his existence for a certain period of time that continues to live in and as its readers. At one point in "A"-18 there are a couple lines observing that in a roman à clef any resemblances to the living are intended if the living recognize themselves in it (393). In other words, whatever readers recognize of themselves in Zukofsky's poem is intended and made by the work. Returning to our line, the specific words Zukofsky chooses to play with here are hardly innocent. We might take "pogrom" as a reference to what caused Zukofsky's parents to immigrate to the U.S., although precise information on that decision is apparently non-existent, but in any case the reference to the more recent fate of European Jewry and its long history is unavoidable. This casts some shadow on the sense of "program," although in the immediate context of the line (leaving aside the aural play for the moment) the main meaning would seem to refer to a musical program—music countering pogrom. The pogrom/program pairing suggests a version of the disorder/order binary, in which case the antithesis remains dialectically active throughout, whether we think of "A", narrative, history, or the relation between, say, music-poetry and history. The reader will not be surprised that I am disinclined to decide among the possibilities just thrown up, but see the very "blaze" of these variant readings as the active principle running through "A"-18. "Pogrom" then also reminds us again of Vietnam and of the powers of disorder that assert themselves (often in the name of order) so strongly in this movement, not merely in its references or materials but in its form, against which Zukofsky actively struggles to find a program, in the sense of a musical program, principles of relation and harmony that ultimately must be connections with others in and through the poetry. The measure of desperation sensed in this movement is a measure of the precariousness of any felt belief that it is possible to connect with others in current circumstances. A number of times in the movement we come across variations on the assertion that song or music saves or preserves it (393, also 391-392) apparently written by an admirer or fellow poet. But Zukofsky seems not so sure at this moment, and the recurrence takes one of those darkly humorous turns where "preserves" in a jar go rancid (393).

I will continue with the lines that follow, but first want to jump to the end of the paragraph which appears unambiguously self-reflexive. Taking the last half dozen lines, we first find mention of Bach's *Notebook for Anna Magdalena Bach* as a collaborative project with his (second) wife, which certainly rimes with Zukofsky's often reiterated insistence that his wife and son are integral to his own work, which occasionally manifested itself in actual collaborations. We have already come across this motif in relation to Celia's recovery of "I Sent Thee Late" and it will reappear elsewhere. Here it is important to note that Celia or the family functions as a figure for the inherent sociability of Zukofsky's work, both in the sense that it is inhabited so to speak by the presence of Celia and all manner of other ghosts and that it seeks others, readers—with Celia standing as Zukofsky's first and ideal reader.

Coming immediately after this appearance of Bach, the following quotation seems a description of the form of the fugue, which Zukofsky early on declared to be a formal model that “A” itself aspires to emulate (“A”-6.38) and can be taken as an ideal of complex dialectical form generally.<sup>16</sup> This ideal form is the intersection of order and sense perception so as to realize a sense of “all complexity” while maintaining coherence. By “all complexity” (not simply “complexity”) we can understand the totality of the world, the sense of the work as a point on which everything impinges. Zukofsky then concludes this paragraph by asserting that this principle of form is not a matter of association but a sense that this is how things fall together—which might remind us of the quotation on “natural” or rustic order from Landor, as well as Zukofsky’s early definition of “objectification” as a “rested totality” (*Prep+* 13,194). As the next phrase starting the following paragraph indicates, by “association” Zukofsky has in mind the notion of “free association,” which for a keen reader of Spinoza is illusionary. Associations or relations are never free but determined according to one’s nature, or if one prefers you can turn this inside out and say according to the infinitely complicated totality within which we are imminently situated. This is one way to understand the following (next paragraph) conglomeration of instances of horses related to variations of Lu-, that is to Zukofsky’s name. Both Zukofsky’s given name and his horse mania are in one sense arbitrary, but they are lived as if determinative, given to the poet beyond any will of his own. This is all part of one’s entanglement in the world, which manifests itself in engagements across language.

Returning to the earlier part of the paragraph, my jump to the end was to indicate that the paragraph as a whole is framed by various self-reflexive pieces, addressing questions of form and the poem’s active figuralness. In between, however, things get far murkier and despite numerous references to the arts and books, it is difficult to discern a plausible principle of order. Immediately following the line on “pogrom” and “program,” we have a quotation attributed to Charles Doughty mentioning Semites, which one might initially relate to the preceding mention of pogrom. This quotation also mentions “heaven,” which is then picked up in an anecdote about Arnold Schönberg in Hollywood, followed by mention of the recitation of Ferdowsi’s great Persian epic, the *Shahnamah*, which might be seen as an antithetical art form to Hollywood’s vulgarities, as well as vaguely referring to a culture in the same general region as Doughty’s Arabia. Or maybe the question is: what is the similarity between the *Shahnamah*, Hollywood and Schönberg? Then comes a reference to a friend’s eating habits, almost certainly Basil Bunting who long held the ambition to translate the *Shahnamah* and sent passages to Zukofsky during former’s days in Tehran in the 1940s and early 50s. But here things begin falling apart. The reference to Bunting is entirely private, and what does his eating manner (like a vulture!) have to do with Persian poetry or anything else that has preceded? As we proceed, matters become more disparate and the sour note sounded by Doughty becomes increasingly pronounced. If we return for moment to Doughty, those who know his great classic *Travels in Arabia Deserta* (1888) will be aware that the Semites he mentions are actually Arabs (and in that sense not obviously related to pogroms), and specifically the target of his sentence is Wahhabism, what is often referred to as the fundamentalist form of Islam dominate in the Arabian peninsula. The sentence quoted is a typical example of Doughty’s deliberately idiosyncratic and archaic English, but what attracts Zukofsky is the mention of eyes, which are here polluted by a fanatical monotheism, denying our sensuous existence in the world—in this specific case the world is a desert. As we know from *Bottom*, Zukofsky was an interested reader of Freud’s *Moses and Monotheism* and the argument that monotheism involved the repression of the body and sensuous particulars in

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<sup>16</sup> The quotation in its original context does not refer to the music but to a Mayan sculpted head of stone; from Roger Fry, *Last Lectures* (1939).

deference to an abstract conception, thus the prohibition against images.<sup>17</sup> Further down the paragraph is a related instance where Zukofsky notes the unfortunate implications of the creation of the word “reality” from “real.” Perhaps in this context the recitation of the *Shahnamah* (and possibly Schönberg’s music as well) offer a more sensuous heaven experienced as here and now to counter monotheistic abstractions existing somewhere else. However, the problem of abstraction is nothing other than the problem of representation and figuration, and if poetry and music by their very nature are activities that aspire to counter the imbalance of abstraction, there is no question of overcoming in any definitive sense what is necessarily inherent in the solution.

No doubt with sufficient ingenuity, one could continue to allegorize much of this as meta-commentary in the manner I read the earlier lines of the paragraph. However, “A”-18 is deliberately overloaded, where principles of association are everywhere suggested but tend to crash. While any reader of “A” will be all too familiar with this sense that there is just too much information to cope with, “A”-18 ratchet this up to an unprecedented degree. I am not inclined to explain away this rumble, which if nothing else asserts sensuous impurity, the “naturalness” of the higgledy-piggledy presence of being in the world. The poem attempts to put in motion the dense figuralness of living as writing-reading, which is not a simple feel-good state of freedom and possibility but is unnerving and therefore creates the desire to repress, forget, codify.

## V

Approaching the end of the movement, there is another sustained collage of quotations from J.S. Bach’s biography, specifically details from his years in Cöthen. Its inclusion in “A”-18 is programmatic in that Zukofsky evidently decided to interpolate segments of Bach’s biography into each of the longer movements from “A”-14 to -18, each passage covering a major phase in standard accounts of his life determined by where he lived and worked: early life and Lüneburg (“A”-14), Weimar (“A”-15) and Cöthen (“A”-18), with the final and most important period in Leipzig presumably taken care of previously with the details of *St. Matthew Passion* in “A”-1 and -8.<sup>18</sup> There does not appear to be a strong attempt to relate these Bach passages with the other themes and the materials of the given movements, so it is as if they form a thread that arbitrarily cuts through them to simply remind us of the initiating importance of Bach in “A” generally, and by this time the Bach motif has accumulated various key associations for “A” overall, most obviously music and the role it plays both formally and thematically in the poem. The collaged biographical portrait is almost entirely factual, depicting a professional musician immersed in the complexities of his living, out of which he composed his works. In this sense these Bach passages relate to Zukofsky’s insistence that aesthetic work is not essentially distinct from the work of living, as well as his anti-heroic model of the artist-poet, unless simply composing in the face of the practicalities and distractions of everyday life is seen as heroic. It is possible to draw out certain details that are echoed elsewhere in the movement, such as the neglect of

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<sup>17</sup> In the four paragraphs Zukofsky quotes from *Moses and Monotheism* (Bottom 67-69), Freud also relates the shift from animism and instinct to monotheism and abstract thought to the shift from matriarchy to patriarchy, since maternity is proved by sight and paternity by deduction. So all this could be related to the Trobrianders’ beliefs on conception. Zukofsky is not taking Freud’s anthropological speculations as gospel, but he is interested in what the figural model suggests about the fate of language and thought.

<sup>18</sup> Zukofsky’s primary source for these biographical passages is a standard scholarly treatment by Charles Sanford Terry, *Bach: A Biography* (1928), which he appears to have used as early as “A”-4 (1928).

talent when Bach composed the *Brandenburg Concertos* for his boss, the Prince of Cöthen, who evidently never bothered to have them performed. At one and only one point Zukofsky interpolates a personal correlation: at the mention that Bach accompanied the Prince to the hot springs resort of Carlsbad, Zukofsky refers to Saratoga, that is, Saratoga Springs, from where he and Celia had just returned from a residency at the Yaddo artist retreat when he composed the main body of “A”-18 (earlier in the movement Saratoga is alluded to in relation to its other claim to fame: horse racing (395)). Curiously, what Zukofsky represses from this episode is the fact that Bach’s first wife died suddenly while he was at Carlsbad, unless it is hinted at in the “shades of Saratoga,” a phrase that in any case is another indication of ghostly presences. Zukofsky ends this Bach passage by mentioning the exercise book Bach composed for his eldest son (another intra-familial work), which links with the next brief stanza of the midnight phone call from his own son discussed above.

Given Zukofsky’s rejection of narrative structure, of any clear overriding argument or psychological development, the late movements of “A” tend to end rather than conclude. The ending of “A”-18 is characteristically puzzling and appears to stop on a relatively desultory and trivial note, albeit one that predictably brings us once again back to Celia. On closer inspection there is a deliberate looping back to the beginning of the main body in the repetition of two words: swan and buoy. In the opening stanza following the lyrical prelude, these two words appear in the context of that off-color joke previously mentioned: a surgeon notices in the course of operating on a sailor that he has “SWAN” tattooed on his penis, but when he later expresses his admiration at the aptness of this tattoo the sailor exclaims that it does not say “SWAN” but “SASKATCHEWAN”—only readable, it is implied, when fully erect (390). The “buoy” in this case refers to the sailor, an apt pun. If this joke’s appearance in “A”-18 were not puzzling enough, the deliberate looping back to it at the conclusion is initially bewildering—although if nothing else perhaps it suggests that Zukofsky is not as sober minded a poet as he is sometimes made out to be. I am going to leave this in suspense for the time being to examine some of the detail at the end of “A”-18 that lead up to this looping back to the joke in the hope that this might help us figure out what is going on.

I begin a page or so from the end with that typical 1960s remark previously mentioned that the old are to blame (406), which I related to the father-son/generational motif. This is followed by the line: “That death should sing: the young live after.” This might be understood as part of the father-poet’s response against the accusations of the son and his generation: the older generation of the 1920s and 30s had tried and hoped to bring song (peace) out of life-times dominated by world wars—and this would relate to the internationalist outlook expressed in the immediately preceding line. An alternative but related reading is to recall the unearthing motif: the task of the poet (or of parents, or culture, etc.) is to call up the ghosts of the past in order to lay out the possibilities for the future. The young (the living) live by singing the dead (inherited past), which might be taken as the ultimate come-back to the accusation that the old are to blame for the present. Obviously, one can rearticulate this in any number of ways, but the essential point is the relation between past and future, old and young, tradition and possibilities, and the mention of “song” implicates poetry or the aesthetic generally as engaged in the activation of what could be which constantly shipwrecks against the frustrating obstruction of what is. As mentioned, Zukofsky’s working assumption or perspective is that ghosts (the past) are present, they are the sense of social inheritance, of others, and of latent potentialities as yet unrealized—and problems arise when one attempts to forget, represses or deny them. So we get a couple lines later a well-known quotation from that famous ghost story *Hamlet* that amounts to the statement that all time (past and future) is now—the famous missing phrase is “the readiness

is all,” not a bad bit of advice for reading this poem.<sup>19</sup> This is immediately followed by the first of a catalogue of quotations from Jonathan Swift to the effect that one necessarily writes with the materials offered by the past or others, which does not mean it is not one’s “own.” This approach to the question of influence or belatedness is quintessentially Zukofskian: not to fend off but to allow influences (ghosts) to flood in, and this is inherent in his basic practice: the direct working with found materials. I have argued that the implications of this stance are programmatically carried out in “A”-22 & -23 where textual materials from across the entire spectrum of literate history are incorporated—not merely as quotation but often reworked as pun, soundscape or homophonic transmutation—to implicate the interrelations that exist throughout all languages and times, including the potential possibilities that are inherent in any words here and now: “an era any time of year” (see commentary on “A”-22 & -23). The juxtaposition of Hamlet and Swift is striking and characteristic, a complete clash of tone or mood. Given the frequency of such turns in “A”, we can take this as the fugal mode that attempts to hold together “all complexity,” although I want to suggest that here it also marks a turn or modulation from the Hamlet-like (or Job-like) mood that predominates throughout much of this movement to a more comic vein, which includes a fair dose of self-mockery. *Hamlet* itself is a play that, depending on one’s mood or ears, can be high tragedy or parody, or a curious mixture of the two—is Hamlet tragic or playing at being tragic? In any case, the final page of so of the movement is in a decidedly more comical mood, without the dark humor encountered so often elsewhere.

If we take a quick overview from this point to the end of the movement, we have the quotation from Swift just mentioned, a passage of related quotations from the *Memoirs of Martinus Scriblerus* set off as an independent stanza, then the final stanza begins with quotations from Aristotle and Swift, and the last seven or so lines are a baffling combination including a quotation from Proust as well as a reference to Celia and the looping back to the sailor joke. First we need to account for this catalog of quotations from 18<sup>th</sup> century writers. As already hinted, the satire here is humorous rather than sardonic, and therefore strikes a different chord than the dark humor so pervasive in “A”-18. Zukofsky obviously could have chosen more misanthropic material from the same authors,<sup>20</sup> but he did not, and this indicates his desire to bring the movement to a lighter end, which may be the point of the interpolated remark about laughing without a mask (407). However, transplanting 18<sup>th</sup> century satire into the compacted textual environment of “A”-18 destabilizes the moral perch that determines its targets and the judgments made at their expense—the satire has, so to speak, been emasculated. The inevitable result is that the satire tends to turn back on itself, incriminating the poet or else (perhaps the same thing) implicating anyone. Indeed, Zukofsky is deliberately deflating the pretenses of the poet, and the Scriblerus stanza is precisely a mocking of such pretenses, which we can recognize as directed against himself as well as others. Scriblerus is any scribbler (poet), and the quotations mocking Scriblerus touch on topics of perennial interest in “A”. Most obvious is the mention of Scriblerus’ tract about colonizing the moon, as references to the space race and landing on the moon appear throughout virtually all the movements of the 1960s right through to the moon landing itself in “A”-22 (510). While it is true that these references include a good deal of bite to the extent that the space race was a manifestation of the Cold War, Zukofsky was also clearly fascinated by it, not least because of the traditional association of poets with the moon and the lunatic—indeed colonizing the moon is not an inappropriate metaphor for poetic ambitions. The quotation referring to

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<sup>19</sup> The latter phrase is quoted five times in *Bottom* (77, 152, 302, 358), as well as at “A”-23.554.6. This same passage from *Hamlet* culminates in the “let be” previously mentioned.

<sup>20</sup> Some pages previous there are a few lines quoted from Samuel Johnson’s “Life of Swift,” paraphrasing Swift’s caustic exposure of political corruption and war-profiteering (401-402).

Heidegger brings in Zukofsky's long standing insistence on the importance of music's relationship with poetry, as well as again the motif of influence. Heidegger was an impresario and manager of a major theater in London, but of course Zukofsky would have been amused that this name evokes a more contemporary reference—even though I am not aware that he ever showed the slightest interest in the *ernst* German philosopher. The reference to Scriblerus as the “Philosopher of Ultimate Causes” is a plausible enough designation of the overweening poet, which is not entirely mocking in the sense that Zukofsky certainly thought of poetic conceptions as a good deal more complex than cause and effect (grammatical) paradigms can account for. Is it preposterous, particularly for a poet steeped in Spinoza, to suggest that Zukofskian poetics perceive effects in their causes?—which is simply to say that the terms “cause” and “effect” imply and endlessly pivot around each other. The final Scriblerus quotation, attributed to Swift, is a faux modest expression of immodesty, of the under- or unappreciated talent of the speaker.<sup>21</sup> This quotation also chimes with the concluding quotation of the Samuel Johnson passage (396), where he asserts that the labor of his *Dictionary* was accomplished without any institutional support or patronage, and the fact that this too has clear autobiographical relevance is another indication that we cannot take Zukofsky's view of Johnson as entirely ironical. References to the neglect of talent are quite frequent in the later movements of “A”, at a time when Zukofsky, after decades of obscurity, was no longer neglected. I have argued elsewhere that he had strongly ambivalent feelings about his late “discovery” (see commentary to “A”-21), but here, together with the other Scriblerus quotations, the point is self-mocking and pokes fun at the false modesty inherently bound up with the poetic enterprise.

If we have not cottoned onto this, then the opening line of the final stanza should clue us in. After all the difficulties and turbidity of the movement, we have the announcement of some kind of formula for successful poetry. This line, presented as a quotation, is from the opening sentence of Aristotle's *Poetics*, as Zukofsky parenthetically notes while also adding Scriblerus' name to indicate the register in which the line is to be read. The ambiguities of the word “success” are important here: a successful poem or success as a poet, that is, making it in the poetry business. The quotations that immediately follow are from Swift's “A Letter of Advice to a Young Poet” (as is the earlier quotation about priming one's pump and lighting one's candle with a neighbor's flame), which is a satire specifically aimed at the latter sense of “success”—poetry as a career. Therefore, for example, Swift's advise that poets should be “ill clad,” look a bit down and out, which had its obvious contemporary resonance at a time when variations on the beatnik look were practically de rigueur among young poets (Zukofsky himself, from a family in the clothing industry, was always a neat and formal dresser). Keeping in mind that the humor of these concluding pages is directed as much at himself and the pretenses of the poet as at others, the satire on the poetry business is hardly from a perspective that claims to be outside such corruptions. One might note that this social condition of poetry was a long-standing concern to Zukofsky, and his “Objectivist” emphasis on that hopeless critical term, “sincerity,” registers the significance of the threat.

The assortment of snippets from “Advice to a Young Poet” is a curious amalgamation of nature and clothing metaphors, with the garden/gardener mediating between nature and

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<sup>21</sup> *The Memoirs of the Extraordinary Life, Works, and Discoveries of Martinus Scriblerus* was a never completed project conceived by the members of the Scriblerus Club (including Pope, Swift, Gay, Arbuthnot and others). The standard and most substantial text under this title was published in 1741 as part of the works of Alexander Pope, although it was largely written by John Arbuthnot. An earlier version appeared under Swift's name in 1723. The final quotation Zukofsky uses is from this latter edition, which explains why he attributes it to Swift, whereas the other quotations are from the “Pope” version.

artifice. We could go to Swift's letter-essay to recover the context of the quotations, which would help make local sense of them. However Zukofsky is not presenting them as an allusion, but rather as a, admittedly quirky, construct that foregrounds the figuralness of the organic conceit so that the relation between nature and artifice, content and form—in a word, the problem of representation—cannot be stabilized or decided. The formula for successful poetry, therefore, is rendered absurd, and actually Swift's letter of advice is itself a send-up of such advice. What this boils down to is a bit of self-satire on the idea that the old can give advice to the young. Formally, then, this embodies the tension between some concept of natural, authentic poetry and its various artifices, including the career aspect, which after all is a dimension of poetry's sociability. It is characteristic that Zukofsky offers these tangles without adjudicating them because one cannot simply pretend to stand clear and also because the very terms themselves are necessarily inextricable. We can read the implications of this back into, say, the references to the Vietnam War, which certainly Zukofsky condemns, but not straight-forwardly because the privileged perch that would allow one to do so is not available.

The last half dozen lines (after the parenthetical interpolation<sup>22</sup>) present another, more complicated tangle, in the middle of which is a quotation from Proust that essentially repeats the alternative but interrelated definitions of "success": we cannot expect to be judged according to what we believe to be our latent talents but according to the reputation we have attained. The precise tone that would guide us in how to read this is, again, unclear; indeed, we are told that "Swan" is reading and considering its meaning or implications but nothing firmer than that. "Swan" is a clue that we are reading Proust and the thought of Swann reading Proust is amusing, but the reference is too private to reasonably be taken as an allusion—even though later the Zukofskys will identify Proust here in the index. "Swan" is, as previously mentioned, a word that loops back to the beginning of the movement, as well as being a designation for the poet (e.g. the Swan of Avon<sup>23</sup>), since obviously it is actually Zukofsky who is the one reading and considering this bit from Proust. The lead into this mention of "Swan" and the quotation asserts that the old sing the young—essentially a variant on the earlier line, "That death should sing: the young live after." Poetry is never one's own and already anticipates that to come. To say that this asserts the poet's sense of being in the tradition is true but rather banal, as there is a complex dynamic of continuity and making new, of uniqueness and its necessary interplay with the common, of the transmutations of (re)reading and (re)writing—in a word, the possibilities and queasiness of figuration. In this instance we have "Swan" (in one sense Zukofsky) reading Proust in his

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<sup>22</sup> This interpolation is private, but relates to the topic of poetic success. While the grapevine image might be related to the gardening metaphors from Swift, very few could be expected to identify Henry R. as Rago, editor of *Poetry* magazine, and even fewer guess what is being referred to here—including Rago himself (although in the index to "A" he is identified). Rago was very supportive of Zukofsky, and during his tenure (1955-1969) virtually all the movements of "A" from "A"-14 through -21 were first published in *Poetry*, where Zukofsky already intended and expected "A"-18 to appear. Rago also dedicated an entire issue to Zukofsky (Oct. 1965), which while in the planning stages he told the latter should be kept a secret, but Zukofsky had already heard about it from the "grapevine." All this is an in-joke, which Zukofsky had to explain even to Rago, and serves as a private tribute to someone who was important to Zukofsky's own, albeit late, success (*SL* 310-312).

<sup>23</sup> See *Bottom* where Zukofsky finds the template for "Swan of Avon" in Antipater of Sidon (*Greek Anthology*) who called Anacreon (6<sup>th</sup> century BC) "the Teian swan" (356).

own terms as a textual snippet integrated into his own work without any great concern whether he is being faithful to Proust's original meaning, whatever that means.<sup>24</sup>

At this point Celia appears, who often functions in "A" as the figure of groundedness and whose quips puncture tendencies toward poetic self-absorption (this is how I read the end of "A"-12, see commentary). Here she says that "the buoy exclaimed," which in the first instance within the larger context of "A" would refer to Paul (the young, and "not the sailor"), yet at the same time it does refer to the sailor where the "buoy" apparently originated in Celia's "misprint" for "boy"—since Zukofsky did not type, this job was usually done by Celia.<sup>25</sup> Whether or not one catches all these quasi-hidden implications, the movement clearly enough ends with the poet with his wife and thus echoes the earlier part of the main body where Celia recovers the poem given the title, "I Sent Thee Late," and also the lyrical prelude where the two are bound together in an overtly figural manner. If "buoy" is a misprint that then becomes integral to the poem, this is simply a small acknowledgement that the poem is never one's own but is always necessarily being handed over to others—whether these others are thought of as one's materials or traditions, one's readers, or those others in one's life that are invariably present in and as one's "self."<sup>26</sup> Actually Zukofsky does not explicitly refer to Celia but introduces her presence as if a voice in his own head, so we could tie all this back into the critique of masculinity previously discussed. "Her" "misprint" therefore becomes a slight but crucial corrective, a swerve from the centered self, from mastery (fatherhood) of the poem, from the desire for poetic "success" and the recognition of one's latent powers.

What about the sailor joke? If nothing else it might be taken as an egalitarian gesture in what would normally be taken as a high-brow poem. The connection between the earlier and concluding passages is purely verbal and arbitrary and hardly seems convincing as a wrap-up. This looping back to the beginning gives no sense of bringing the thematic concerns of the movement to a resolution or conclusion, but rather there is merely a verbal redistribution or relocation. Plugging back into the joke suggests something of the ludic propensities of this poetic language—relations are constantly thrown up and they can lead to surprising places. The allegorical possibilities of the joke are irresistible: limp beauty versus erect reality, which can be related to the gender subtext of the poem in which the Trobrianders offer a defamiliarizing alternative. Again Celia's or "her" misprint marks a feminine intrusion that softens or deflects (from "boy" to "buoy") the sailor's rather absurdly literal assertion of manhood—she augments or reinterprets the joke, which after all itself turns on verbal play. Jokes and wit are themselves exemplary of language exchange as acts of sociability, as well as of figuration. In light of our discussion of the topic of fatherhood, which in the Trobriand redefinition is divorced from paternity and thus discounts the phallus, we can perceive a possible critique here. The masculine aggressiveness of the sailor's penis and its social implications is indicated in Zukofsky's referring to it as "mentula," an allusion

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<sup>24</sup> In Proust, the passage from which Zukofsky quotes is spoken by the narrator and has nothing to do with Swann who is largely absent from this volume, *The Guermantes Way*. Proust's narrator is remarking on his rather disparaging judgment of a young unknown, but soon to be famous actress who is the mistress of a friend. Which is to say, this is about a misjudgment and a self-correction by the narrator who underestimated her genius because she did not yet have a reputation—the type of misjudgment of which all of us are guilty.

<sup>25</sup> There is a similar incorporation of a "mistake" at "A"-21.474.34-36. In American pronunciation at least "buoy" is sounded differently whether used as a noun or a verb, with the latter homophonic with "boy." The floating image seems apt for a signifier that slips both grammatically and punningly.

<sup>26</sup> One could also add to this list the unconscious as the source of such slips, although Zukofsky himself disliked psychological explanations.

to Catullus that had previously appeared in “A”-8 (50). In four Catullus poems, *Mentula*, a vulgar term meaning prick or cock, is used as a satiric name for an officer who through political patronage under Julius Caesar became emblematic of corruptly acquired wealth, vulgar ostentation and sexual profligacy.<sup>27</sup> When erect the sailor’s penis is labeled “Saskatchewan,” which obviously is a Native American name and therefore hints at another example of the repression and appropriation of native cultures. Limp (or lower case), the penis is a mere “swan,” which elicits the surgeon’s admiring remark on the aptness of this signifier, presumably because a limp penis suggests the graceful neck of a swan. The limp swan is evidently preferable to the erect. We can detect an implication about signifiers, a contrast between the fully revealed “Saskatchewan” (although actually it hides more than it pretends) and the half revealed “swan” that seem to point or resonate in any number of unexpected directions, such as to Proust’s Swann—a signifier set in play. If paternity is surrendered, words will always relate polyphonically, and it is in this realization, or better, in the acting out of this realization that Zukofsky understands whatever hope there is to counter the powers of repression. Ultimately we do not argue ourselves into being a community, rather we act out an existence where “I” is always also equally “you,” “her” and “them.”

In one sense the incorporation of the sailor joke can be seen as an egalitarian gesture, the inclusion of the low or seemingly unpoetic into serious (?) poetry—although this of course is typically modernist (Pound includes an off-color sailor joke in Canto XII, but his handling is quite different). However, Zukofsky gives this joke a particular emphasis and situates it such that it textually bleeds back in various directions. Any textual material is potential fodder for poetry, and here quite unpromising matter can be shown to be useable precisely because of its figuralness and iterability. This simply demonstrates the sociability of poetry or of being human—we are never here but that we are also there and everything somehow relates.

## VI

Writing according to an emasculated conception means avoiding overriding formal or thematic structures and allowing the poem to find its own shape and concerns. In simple practical terms, this is reflected in Zukofsky’s practice from “A”-12 on in gathering materials more or less randomly and then working up the individual movements from what he had accumulated. Within the larger context of “A”, “A”-18 demonstrates Zukofsky’s primary interest in a formal and tonal rather than thematic diversity. After the short and lighter word-count movements of “A”-14 and “A”-19 (begun before the main body of “A”-18), there is the deliberate trial of a much longer word-count line and an unusually dark mood, albeit mixed with counter-tones as is always the case in “A”. This fits with Zukofsky’s full acceptance that each movement of “A” is sui generis to a degree that is latent but not fully pursued in the first half of “A” (see Z-Notes commentary on the forms of “A”). While one might be inclined to explain the appearance of “A”-18 as Zukofsky’s reaction to the events and mood of the day,

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<sup>27</sup> Zukofsky’s notebooks indicate that the phrase “manroot / pollutes their throats” (396) alludes, at least privately, to Catullus’ *Mentula* poems (Catullus 94, 105, 114, 115) (HRC 4.6, dated 15 Sept. 1965). This phrase does not appear to be either a homophonic or free translation from any of these poems, but the savage satirical tone is similar enough. In *Catullus*, Zukofsky renders “mentula” as “mean tool,” but “manroot” seems an apt alternative. Zukofsky included one of the *Mentula* poems (Catullus 115) in *A Test of Poetry* (10), which declares that for all *Mentula*’s vast estates and wealth the most amazing thing about him is that he is a “monstrous menacing *Mentula*” (translation by F.W. Cornish). So all this establishes that Zukofsky’s inclusion of a dirty joke in “A”-18 has solid classical precedent.

one can also view the poem as pushing further the implications of the formal commitments of “A” as they developed. *Catullus* was crucial as a kind of de-programming of grammatical habits, a methodical means of opening up alternative modes of writing. “A”-18 furthers this process in a different manner, a compacting of materials that largely disregards the integrity of the line and in this sense anticipates the dense mode of “A”-22 & -23 and *80 Flowers*. My suggestion has been that this perpetually forces up the textual background out of which the specific text manifests itself, a ground that simultaneously threatens to dissolve that text as much as promising opportunities to enlarge and enrich it.

10 Oct. 2014