

I

The following will not attempt a comprehensive reading of “A”-22 & -23—poems that render problematic the question of just what a comprehensive reading might mean. I want first to describe and look at a few examples of the unusual compositional procedure of these movements, then to polemically consider some of the problems with previous attempts to decode them, and finally to suggest some models for how we might read these poems. A number of commentators have already described in more or less detail how Zukofsky composed these movements, above all Michele Leggott, to whom I am indebted for much of what follows, although I have made my own pilgrimages to the working notebooks preserved in the Humanities Research Center in Austin, Texas to confirm, differ from or augment the accounts of previous scholars. For all practical purposes “A”-22 & -23 are composed almost entirely out of hundreds of source texts that have been submitted to the usual gamut of Zukofskian reworkings. The annotations to “A”-22 & -23 on the Z-site identify the sources for the large majority of the lines in these two movements, although there are still significant gaps, most of which no doubt can be solved through further forensic research on Zukofsky’s papers. However, even more than usual, the identification of source materials that Zukofsky used to compose these movements begs a number of questions. Throughout “A”, but particularly in those movements written after World War II, Zukofsky uses found texts primarily as compositional materials rather than as allusion or reference, and he also tends to use everything he read, including newspapers and other mundane sources. This is not to say that the materials he starts with and how he transforms them are random, but they are so overdetermined that any attempt to rationalize why he chose this particular material and altered it to produce the final poetic text will always remain highly speculative.

The basic plan for gathering and organizing the materials used in “A”-22 & -23 was simply a variation of Zukofsky’s long established practice. For all the long movements from at least “A”-12 (excepting the special case of “A”-21), Zukofsky used a small loose-leaf notebook to collect materials pretty much randomly consisting almost entirely of quotations of one kind or another. He composed directly from these loose-leaf notebooks, which were closely reread: adding in later materials, making cross-references and crossing out entries once they were used. “A”-22 & -23 however did have a plan: Zukofsky gave himself five years to collect readings from pre-history to the modern to be arranged in chronological order. For this purpose he used a medium sized spiral notebook divided in half and dated each pair of open pages—by millennium (started with “pre-3000 BC”) in the earliest periods and later by century up through the 20th. Much of the unused materials he had already on hand in his last loose-leaf notebook going back to 1964 were transferred to the appropriate chronological time in the spiral notebooks, but now his entries went directly into one or the other of the two chronologies in this spiral notebook.¹ Characteristically as pages filled up they often became extremely compacted with Zukofsky’s small, at times minute cursive hand, as he squeezed notes in sideways and even upsidedown. It is often difficult to determine whether materials added later are placed with previous entries because of association or simply because there happened to be some spare space on the page. Although he did at times continue notes on succeeding pages, one has the impression Zukofsky liked to be able to see as many different possibilities going on in a given space and often squeezed in materials past

¹ For a meticulous description of the various notebooks involved, see Michele J. Leggott, *Reading Zukofsky’s “80 Flowers”* (1989): 4-11.

the point of legibility. One can imagine that occasionally even Zukofsky had difficulty deciphering these over-filled pages, so that the end may be partially the result of some creative guessing (cf. 12.251.25-27).

The distinction between the materials assigned for “A”-22 & -23 respectively is history and literature, although for Zukofsky such a distinction is arbitrary and it is appropriately impossible to identify any rigorous difference between the materials used.² The most frequently used source in “A”-22 is Herbert Giles’ *A History of Chinese Literature*, which it is true is a history, although what Zukofsky mainly draws on is not Giles’ “history” but the numerous samples of the writers themselves. Philosophy, particularly ancient Greek, figures prominently in “A”-22 as well. It may be that the prose/poetry (or thought/music-poetry, as Rieke suggests) distinction is a more useful criteria for determining the materials used in the respective movements, although again there are numerous exceptions (Alison Rieke, *The Senses of Nonsense* (1992): 201). All of which simply indicates that Zukofsky was little interested in drawing a strict generic or thematic distinction in his materials, but he probably had in mind a loose idea that the materials in “A”-23 should sing a degree higher than those of “A”-22. One suspects that once he finished “A”-22 but came across new readings he liked he would not have been put off by the fussiness of exact generic categorizations.

Each movement of “A”-22 & -23 is 1000 lines, each line having five words—the 5-count line became his preferred form in all his last poems from “A”-21 through *80 Flowers*. The central body of 800 lines uses in chronological order the various materials he had gathered and is framed by segments of 100 lines, each of which is broken up into five line stanzas. These framing segments include more personal materials, even sometimes approaching personal statement, but they incorporate diverse textual materials as well. The tail segment of “A”-23 is distinct from the other framing segments in that it is not broken up into stanzas but only set-off by a line break and continues the chronological order of presentation until the last 26 lines which famously wind things up with an alphabetically organized finale. The combination of marking off the last 100 lines while at the same time continuing with the chronological reworking of sources suggests a collapsing of any distinction between the framing pieces and main bodies, in other words the recognition that such formal orders are arbitrary, as are the divisions between the personal and the historical. “A”-22 also has a slight asymmetry in this basic plan because the first three lines consist of five (or is it six?) words in total set off as a literal block, bolded and in all caps, so three lines are subtracted from the final stanza of the movement. As a result none of the four framing segments is formally exactly like any other. In the central segments Zukofsky is usually quite scrupulous about the chronological sequencing of his materials, although he does often put together obvious groups of materials, such as Greek prose romances or medieval Welsh poetry that may stretch over centuries. Yet here again there are notable irregularities. The main body of “A”-22 begins with the volcanic birth of an island off Iceland (actually a contemporary event), but then seems to continue with some of the materials and themes of the introductory framing segment before getting back on its chronological track at line 27. From this point there is a long passage from Sir Charles Lyell’s *Geographical Evidence of the Antiquity of Man* (1863) mixed with Darwinian passages from *The Education of Henry*

² A number of scholars have asserted that it is natural history that characterizes the materials used in “A”-22. This is understandable given the geological and nature imagery that predominate in the first few pages of the main body, plus a substantial segment worked from Theophrastus’ *Enquiry into Plants* and even the abundant botanical detail of the final framing segment, but the bulk of the materials used in “A”-22 simply do not fall into this category.

Adams, moving onto various generally ethnographic materials before settling into historical materials and ending with Darwin, Marx and Faraday. The main body of “A”-23 begins with pre-literate songs and prayers, moves into a long passage from *Gilgamesh* and eventually concludes with Darwin, Hazlitt and Pound. However, for all Zukofsky’s fondness for formal organization, he is rarely inflexible, and at times interpolates bits, particularly from Shakespeare, which in some manner he feels echo or relate to whatever author/material he is working with in his chronological sequence. Near the end of the central segment of “A”-23 Zukofsky interpolates between Langland and Mystery plays materials from Wittgenstein and then Nadezhda Mandelstam (560.21-29)—why precisely here is uncertain but they appear as meta-commentary on the form of his poem. “A”-23 also incorporates into the main body a 32-line passage describing the house and surrounding shrubbery in Long Island where he and Celia moved while he was working on the movement (554.6-7). The placement of this passage immediately follows a segment from the Chinese poet Tao Yuanming (Tao Qian), a great recluse poet and gentleman farmer with whom it pleased Zukofsky to identify, imagining his move to Long Island as a retreat to the country from the bustle and demands of the city. Indeed, Zukofsky deliberately echoes details from Tao Yuanming in the description of his own surroundings. So there is a plan and a structure, but the procedure is open to contingency and deviation.

One of the notable facts about the considerable quantity of working notebooks and papers that are housed in Texas is that there are very few meta-critical remarks—that is, notes on his intentions or plans, other than lists of possible materials to include or reminders to himself to work in this or that materials.³ We are left to speculate as to why he read what he did in preparing for these culminating movements. As far as one can tell, Zukofsky simply read whatever he felt like reading in his retirement, that is, the books already in the family library with the proviso that he needed to supply at least some materials for all the chronological periods for both rough generic categories indicated in his working schema. More to the point is what he chose from these books, but here again it is difficult to detect any clear plan, and at times he would copy out pages of quotations for what in the end produced a few lines. On the other hand, he used something from just about every source from which he took notes, no matter how brief. It is evident that in the process of or preparation for composition, he went through the notes and noted recurrences or parallels of various sorts. Presumably to some degree he would naturally gravitate toward certain recurrences or motifs in taking his notes. An entirely predictable one is horses, which in one guise or another appear almost everywhere in these two movements. In a passage worked from the *Mabinogion* (23.555.35-556.8), for example, Zukofsky draws on three different tales that mention horses, particularly on a legendary story of the poet Taliesin. It would be a mistake, I think, to read these horses as consistently thematic or symbolic—for example as representing the poet. As these mentions of horses (or related terms: manes, stallions, reigns,

³ Leggett perhaps gives the impression that there is more of this sort of reflection than is the case as she reproduces virtually every such scrap available from the late notebooks, which still makes a modest heap over quite a few years of work. She attempts a narrative reading of such notes tracing the development of Zukofsky’s thinking about the form of “A”-22 & -23 culminating in a note of Oct 1970 that expresses the “whole shape of ‘A’ in his head” (57), but unfortunately the description of “A”-22 & -23 given there does not correspond with the poems Zukofsky actually wrote. My inclination is to read these notes as more disparate stabs at possible approaches to “A”-22 & -23, but neither together or individually do they tell us very much that is conclusive about the final poems. I will examine one of these cluster notes in some detail below.

hooves, etc.) get worked into these movements such allegorical interpretations lose their whimsical humor and become counter-productive. More to the point is that horses become simply one means of selecting out specific details from the mass of Zukofsky's reading, and their verbal recurrences in the final text may give a certain sense of in-tying. In this instance Zukofsky made a list of horse passages from his notes on the *Mabinogion* and worked them together, but in the process most of the specific horse references disappear. In the first eleven words of this passage (from "roan" to "sea-horse" at the bottom of 555), five different passages are worked in; "roan" is simply discovered in the name of the tale, "Dream of Ronabey"; the second "sea-horse" is the material from which the hilt of knives are made; and the more extensive third passage about Taliesin is so radically recomposed that the sense of the source has evaporated (HRC 37.4). What has to be resisted and goes against conventional critical expectations is the assumption that Zukofsky's choice of texts to work into his poems indicates information or arguments that he agrees with, or on the contrary wants to disagree with, or even specific themes he wants to propagate. Although it would be rash to say this is never the case, Zukofsky's sources are not used as authorization of or to ventriloquize the views of the poet. Rather they are materials to be written out of by a very literal process of recomposition.

I want to propose a rough schematic range of three transmutational techniques—quotation, creative paraphrase and homophonic transcription—to indicate how Zukofsky handles his source materials in these movements. As one would expect, the delimitation of these techniques is imprecise, especially as Zukofsky can combine any or all of them at any given moment. This range loosely traces the trajectory of Zukofsky's compositional methods over the course of "A" generally. In the early movements and above all in "A"-8, the poet works primarily with collaged quotations, which are frequently condensed by deletion but rarely tampered with. With "A"-9, one can say that the stringent demands of the pre-determined form force the source materials, mainly Marx and Spinoza, into paraphrase. Although "A"-12 is predominately constructed out of quotations, there is a noticeably more flexible approach compared with "A"-8, so that while the large majority of words and phrases are identifiable from the source, they are altered and at times reworded not only according the principle of condensation but for verbal sound or other effects. However, when pushed a bit further, the words and phrases all or mostly come from the source text but the original semantic content may be at best very loose, as is the case in passages worked from Dante and Zechariah. This "original" composition entirely or mostly using the words and phrases from a source text will figure prominently in later movements, such as the *Paradise Lost* passage in "A"-14 or the various voice offs in "A"-21, particularly the long example worked from Isaak Walton's *The Compleat Angler*. With *Catullus*, Zukofsky becomes fascinated with homophonic translation and some examples will appear in almost all the longer movements of the 1960s, the most substantial being the rendition from the Book of Job at the beginning of "A"-15 and from Mallarmé in "A"-19. Particularly in the case of the latter the designation "translation" is inadequate, and I prefer to call this composition by homophonic suggestion. *Catullus* is systematic in that every syllable is accounted for, so each line reproduces the syllable count of the original Latin and it is clear that sounding the Latin is the initiating guiding thread for Zukofsky's rendition, even if it is too reductive to say that Zukofsky is only interested in replicating the sound. In Zukofsky's later homophonic renditions, he is much freer: he often skips around the original text and interpolates English words that are not suggested by sound of the original, although often they are suggested by the English translation, so that one ends up with a thoroughly improvisational result whose process is difficult or impossible to rationalize in detail.

“A”-22 & -23 will bring together all these compositional methods in a particularly concentrated manner. The one consistency throughout the main body of these movements is that they are (almost) always worked directly from source texts (or Zukofsky’s notes which are pretty much entirely quotations). Overall straight quotation does not figure predominately in “A”-22 & -23; nevertheless, there are plenty of examples scattered throughout, which are usually set in italics. Not surprisingly these quotations are mainly historical—Chaucer, Shakespeare, Herrick, Rochester, Gibbon, translations by Elizabeth I, Chapman and Shelley—which signals the historical nature of the materials being incorporated. Overall creative paraphrase accounts for the majority of lines in these movements, although it has to be kept in mind that “paraphrase” in its usual sense is not a very satisfactory concept for what Zukofsky is doing. What I mean is simply that Zukofsky takes an English text and reworks it, but without the semantic sense of the original necessarily guiding or in the end even relevant to what Zukofsky ends up with. Usually some, often most of the words come from the original but handled such that the text is set off in its own direction as Zukofsky works with sounds, recurrences, juxtaposition with other materials or whatever happens to amuse him. As most commentary on these movements demonstrates, it is possible to re-paraphrase or translate Zukofsky’s text into a more readily familiar sense but also that the semantic anchor is usually so loose that different paraphrases are obviously possible, so that there is a high quotient of undecidability.

One difference between “A”-22 and -23 is that in the former homophonic translation is only occasional whereas in the latter it is ubiquitous and over half the lines of the main body are produced wholly or in part in this manner. Partially this is due simply to the rough generic distinction between the source materials he used, as the literary and poetic materials of “A”-23 meant Zukofsky was using a high proportion of the dual-language texts he favored and which were crucial for homophonic composition. The use of these en face translation volumes, especially Loeb Classical Library editions, encouraged an amalgamation of the sounded original language and its translation, although again there is no necessary consistency about this. Zukofsky’s homophonic renderings in “A”-23 are frequently quite far out compared with *Catullus*, presumably because he is not much concerned with replicating some sense of the sound of the original but rather simply “hearing” other “English” possibilities in and behind his pronunciation of pieces of foreign languages. In “A”-23 there are homophonic rendering of some kind from about 15 different languages, few of which he knew—French is probably the only foreign language in which he had a reasonably high competence. (Interestingly, as far as I know, there is no evidence of Yiddish renditions anywhere in “A”, other than the “straight” translations from Yehoash in “A”-4). In “A”-23, homophonic renderings from Greek, Hebrew, Latin and Old English make by far the largest appearances followed by roughly a dozen lines each from medieval Welsh and Spanish. A handful or so of lines are rendered each from Sanskrit, Provençal, French and Italian. A phrase or sometimes a mere word derive from Russian, Portuguese, an Australian aboriginal language and German, with “A”-22 adding a few odd words of Chinese and Inca.⁴

⁴ A special case is the rendition from the native American language Arapaho used for the first eleven lines of the main body of “A”-23 (539). This is actually from a nonsense song or chant found in C.M. Bowra’s *Primitive Song* (1962)—semantically meaningless but obviously not so in its ritualistic context. Bowra gives a phonetic transcription, which Zukofsky relineates to fit his five count line and also retranscribes into phonetically equivalent words that, interestingly, suggest semantic sense in English: ye, no, we, see, hay, knee, etc. There are just nine different sounds in the 53 “words” of this song, 30 of which have a single rhyme (we, see, knee) and 11 one other rhyme (no, io).

A couple of specific examples of brief passages alongside their source texts will offer a clearer idea of how Zukofsky works. First from “A”-22 an example of what I have called creative paraphrase worked from two passages out of Herbert Giles’ *A History of Chinese Literature* (1901):

Red-maple leaves a rush
Of rich robes skyborne seamless
Completed with breath of a
yawn what can divination teach— (528.34-37)

In a prose work by Liu Chi (1311-1375), “a certain noble who had lost all by the fall of the Ch’in dynasty, B.C. 206, and was forced to grow melons for a living, had recourse to divination, and went to consult a famous augur on his prospects. ‘Alas!’ cried the auger, ‘what is there that Heaven can bestow save that which virtue can obtain? [...] Besides, sir, why not reflect upon the past—that past which gave birth to the present? [...] Your endive and watercresses are but the complement of the elephant-sinews and camel’s hump [gourmet delicacies] of days bygone; the **maple-leaf** and the **rush, of** your once **rich robes** and fine attire. Do not repine that those who had not such luxuries then enjoy them now. Do not be dissatisfied that you, who enjoyed them then, have them now no more. In the space of a day and night the flower blooms and dies. [...] These things you know; **what more can divination teach** you?’” (253-254). In the second passage Giles quotes a commentator referring to a work by Hsü Hsieh (17th century): “It is **completed** [...] **with the breath of a yawn** (with a single effort), and is like a heavenly **robe, without seam**” (305).

This is a typical passage in showing how Zukofsky worked directly from the found texts, mostly adopting words found in the source texts but otherwise the original contexts and sense are not recuperable. The last four words offer something like a clear statement, yet although quoted directly from the source they give a quite different sense in Zukofsky’s text. Apparently these two texts have been initially brought together (the second out of chronological order) simply because of the recurrence of “robe,” and from there Zukofsky does the rest. The word “rush” has ingeniously been entirely transformed in meaning, and there are the usual potential puns in “leaves” and “sky-borne.” The soundscaping here is very evident with a rich play of alliteration and assonance, as well as abrupt changes of speed. If we decide that the first passage from Giles is, in a sense, about mortality, then one could say Zukofsky may preserve this sense of the original, but then that is a rather humdrum observation. In any case, it seems safe to say the passage is about transformation which is as much verbally enacted as stated. We might read this as a colorful autumnal description with maple leaves blown up and around in the wind—an image of transience that renders divination pointless (this would more or less recover the moral of the first source). Or always there is the possibility of an allegory about poetry or creation, with relations between the earthly and the heavenly or an escape away from the former into the divine, which is abruptly brought back to earth in the final phrase. Even if we cannot settle on its meaning, it is both imagistically and aurally an intriguing verbal complex.

Our second example is from “A”-23, a few lines out of a roughly two page compendium of Roman period authors:

Humus
Humider flowers: candid lily carpet,
No scantly violet, rosebud rime-matted
Imperative purple’s furious calyxes. (551.21-24)

We have three authors here. First there is Ovid (43BC-17/18) from the *Metamorphoses* V.390-392 (qtd. *Bottom* 409):

frigora dant rami, tyrios humus umida flores:

*perpetuum ver est. quo dum Proserpina luco
ludit et aut violas aut candida lilia carpit [...]*

The branches afford a pleasing coolness, and the well-watered ground bears bright-coloured flowers. There spring is everlasting. Within this grove Proserpina was playing, and gathering violets of white lilies (trans. Frank J. Miller).

Next is Persius (34-62), from *Satire* I.40 (qtd. *Bottom* 411, where Zukofsky reads a recurrence with *Hamlet* V.i.261: “Lay her i’ th’ earth, / And from her fair and unpolluted flesh / May violets spring...”):

*nunc non e manibus illis,
nunc non e tumulo fortunataque favilla
nascentur violae?*

[...] will not violets now spring up from those remains, from the tomb and its thrice-blessed ashes? (trans. G.G. Ramsay).

Finally we have an epigram by Crinagoras of Mitylene (70BC-18) from *The Greek Anthology* VI.345 (first two lines):

Εἶαρος ἦνθει μὲν τὸ πρὶν ρόδα, νῦν δ’ ἐνὶ μέσσω
χείματι πορφυρέας ἐσχάσαμεν κάλυκας [...]
(Romanization: *Eiaros inthei men to prin roda, nyn d’ eni messo
cheimati porphyreas eschasamen kalykas*

Roses used to flower in spring, but we now in mid-winter burst scarlet from our buds [...]

I choose this short passage as an example of composition by homophonic suggestion, which as mentioned becomes more prominent in “A”-23, and as typical example of how Zukofsky often blends together short bits of different authors. I have also noted the recycling of passages used in *Bottom*, which is characteristic. Looking at the original source texts, it is easy enough to see why these three have been brought together (and probably why Persius appears here slightly out of chronological order): all concern flowers associated with spring and death/winter as well as with women. In the first passage death/winter is implicit as Proserpina is about to be raped by Dis. Also in the second the “spring” of the translation is a verb rather than the season, but we need to keep in mind that Zukofsky was reading both translation and facing original, so that the translation may very well explain why these specific passages are originally brought together, even though the resultant text is entirely worked from the original languages.⁵ None of this remains in Zukofsky’s reworking except of course the flowers. This manner of skipping around rather than rendering full lines or passages is, as mentioned, typical of his later homophonic method, as if he is sounding out passages in order to catch certain suggestive phrases or words here and there. The homophonic method invariably adds another layer of garble to Zukofsky’s already noisy manner, and it is a serious question just how far one can usefully divine a meaning in these lines. Again the binding sounds are clearly in evidence. If we sound out this brief passage simply as a unit in itself, it does sound as if the final line draws to a conclusion the preceding series of three-word phrases or perhaps counters them with its assertiveness—a rhythmic suggestion of Persephone’s rape or the inexorable transience of the flowers? Also, not surprisingly since he is dealing with Latin and Greek sources, etymological suggestions are clearly evident. “Candid” for example, which the translator rather flatly renders as “white,” also has the meanings in Latin of shining, pure, guileless. The first phrase is actually a literal word by word translation of a sort with a somewhat comical result. There are some odd suggested links between “carpet” and “-matted” and possibly “scanter” (> scan) and “rime-.”

⁵ For all three poets, Zukofsky is using Loeb editions.

There is the disconcerting mixture of registers and implied contexts so characteristic of Zukofsky's homophonic workings: beginning with what seems more or less a natural setting, we shift to decorative flowers on a carpet, to perhaps the suggestion of a shrinking violet, to what might be imaged as either natural or poetic, to an anthropomorphic figure that could be taken as the antithesis of the shrinking violet. I will make some further guesses as to how we might read this passage below.

To wrap up this description of "A"-22 & -23, something further needs to be said about the framing passages, those segments of 100 lines each that are distinguished from the main bodies by being broken up into 5 line stanzas and whose source materials are not part of the chronological sequences. Strictly speaking there are only three such framing passages, since as mentioned the final 100 lines of "A"-23 both continues the historical presentation of source materials and is not broken up into stanzas. The simple breaking up of these framing passages into stanza suggests a more lyrical mode than the main bodies of the poems, and indeed they do include more personal matter and description as their source materials.⁶ An obvious example is the concluding passage of "A"-22, which is made up of two halves predominately using details, especially of flora, from trips first to Bermuda and then to Bellagio on Lake Como in Italy, both taken in 1972 during the time he was composing "A"-22. But at the same time he does weave in quite a bit of associated textual material, such as texts that happen to relate to Lake Como from Da Vinci's notebooks and Stendhal's *The Charterhouse of Parma* into the concluding stanzas of "A"-22—plus Stendhal provides some horse material. The manner of these framing sections has strong similarities to the idiolect Zukofsky often used, particularly from "A"-13 on, where the poem seems to run in and out of the poet's head in a garbled form—at times suggesting stream of conscious but at others the writing seems to take over the thoughts. Presumably Zukofsky intended a somewhat more personal tone in these framing passages or at least they often work with more experiential materials, and to a degree they are more relaxed than the main bodies. But only to a degree, and overall it is not much clearer what Zukofsky is saying in these passages than elsewhere. Although Zukofsky always composed out of found materials, he also included in those materials details from his immediate life, and therefore these framing passages allowed him to continue to include such materials outside the rather rigid plan he had for the main bodies.

Finally, to return to the beginning, there is the curious block of five (or six) bolded words in three lines with which Zukofsky opens this pair of movements and that he originally published as a poem on its own.⁷ Leggott has offered a detailed reading of this block based on Zukofsky's unusually elaborate notes, indicating the compacted meanings, including manifold etymological suggestions, in these few words (Leggott 34-52), as well as how this complex generates much of the following stanzas. I merely want to emphasize that this opening block is intended as a signal and preparatory exercise in the close eyeing and sounding of the individual words and syllables which can be read in a number of directions. However, it is a mistake to become overly fixated on the crossword-like combinations that Zukofsky (or Leggott) discovers in this word block. It is less that the reader is expected to see

⁶ According to Leggott, Zukofsky's notebooks indicate that he designated these framing segments as "musical" sections as distinct from the main bodies designated "history" (52).

⁷ "AN ERA" was published by Unicorn Press in 1970, as part of series of postcards where Zukofsky's poem is listed as "Concrete Poem," although it is uncertain whether this designation was his idea. It was printed in dark blue letters on a yellow background, which is presumably alluded to in the first full stanza of "A"-22. Yellow was apparently Zukofsky's favorite color.

and hear all the possibilities intended, than simply that the reader needs to open up to the infinite interrelations of words in their manifold dimensions. That is to say, it is not a matter of echoing the specific complex imagined in the poet's original head but of the reader activating the words among other words. In this sense, this little block is an image of "A"-22 & 23 or of "A" as a whole: a complex of relations without grounding, relations that are not simply internal since in order to be recognized as relations they necessarily relate back through the world of texts. An objective, we might say, a focal point of the rays of textual interrelation. More mundanely, we can understand this block as saying "anytime" is an "era"—that is, in language all times and cultures interpenetrate now in the moment of reading. The specific procedure of "A"-22 & -23's composition plays this out in an elaborate manner, and in this sense attempts to draw out the poetic implications of his suggestion that epos can be found in "a" and "the" (*Prep*+ 10).

II

"A"-22 & -23 are not hermetic texts, and the idea that Zukofsky's late work is difficult in the sense of buried meanings, references and similar complications has been the primary obstacle to reading. Zukofsky spent his life writing against just this conception of the text whose essence is a ghost residing somewhere behind the words themselves. Zukofsky is not even a difficult poet, if we mean by that the need to penetrate to the meaning beneath an obscure surface or to run down erudite allusions. "A"-22 instructs us to "read, not into, it" ("A"-22.528.17). Admittedly, such apparently meta-textual remarks, despite their irresistibility, must be taken with caution as authorized by Zukofsky in a text that so vigorously repudiates the idea of a singular intention. In this case, curiously enough, the source text is the 13th century Cabbalist Abraham Abulafia.⁸ The field of Zukofsky criticism is strewn with claims that "Zukofsky says..." in all innocence that they are quoting a (often disfigured) quotation—"mangling done here," quotes "A"-13 (267). Zukofsky's text say nothing, or else anything, in such a direct and unmediated sense. Zukofsky's practice of reworking pre-existing materials needs to be recognized as his basic mode of composition rather than a matter of quoting or condensing as conventionally understood—there is no referring back to a prior text in that sense.

We might think of this in terms of the problem of belatedness and influence, the inevitable sense that Zukofsky and second generation modernists generally were merely followers of, say, Pound and Joyce. Zukofsky's response to the question of influence was to diffuse it, that is, to insist it was not simply a matter of conscious imitation or rejection of predecessors but also of what is "in the air" and the coincidence of temperaments in different

⁸ See Jonathan Ivry, who argues for a theological and Kabalistic reading of "A" generally and "A"-22 & -23 in particular, both formally and in meaning; "[A]ll / things began in Order to / end in Ordainer": The Theological Poetics of Louis Zukofsky from 'A' to X." *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 51.2 (Summer 2009): 203-222. Rieke also advocates a Kabalistic and "sacred" characterization of "A" (162-163). There are three lines worked from Abulafia in "A"-22, and as far as I know these are the only specifically Kabalistic materials used by Zukofsky in "A". Zukofsky's source for Abulafia was a selection chosen by David Meltzer and published in the first issue of his little magazine, *Tree* (1970), and the reason Zukofsky had a copy was that Meltzer had requested and published a brief excerpt from *Bottom* in the same issue. There are a number of references to and quotations from Kabala and mystical Judaism in *Bottom*, and here Zukofsky's source in all cases is Ernst Müller, *A History of Jewish Mysticism* (trans. Maurice Simon, 1946). Some of the materials from Müller used in *Bottom* are recycled into a horse passage in "A"-14 (351-352)).

times and places (*Prep+* 135). The effect of this is a relative devaluation of the role of conscious will in forging works relative to the indeterminable factors that come into play—a stance found in much mid-century experimental American poetry and art as a deflection from high modernist mastery. Influence does not happen from one point to another within the stream of history but is more or less pervasive throughout the social totality, and in this regard Spinoza's immanence model would strongly support Zukofsky's orientation. Although Zukofsky never cared for psychological explanations ("Psych'n lice" Little calls them (*CF* 175)) and his reading of Shakespeare in *Bottom* and choice of Plautus for "A"-21 indicated his disinterest in character motivation, the unconscious nonetheless remains a central assumption, but understood as all that largely "hidden" outside that is inevitably brought to bear at any moment on the thoughts-actions of any individual entity ("A"-12.187-189). Consequently a text is always infinitely related to others and sedimented with repositories of cultural work and use. Zukofsky's conscious working within the iterative nature of writing and reading meant that his use of found materials was not primarily as authorization, as the conjuring of specific voices to ventriloquize his own views or else to be parried in typical ironic modernist manner. In other words, he is not using quotations to situate his work vis-a-vis a preconceived conception of tradition. The poet does not have mastery in that sense.

The implications of Zukofsky's stance toward his materials and manner of composition pose serious challenges for conventional commentary, such as the present discussion. Largely because of institutionally propagated and valorized forms of textual interpretation, there is a widespread assumption that Zukofsky is erudite and that "A" asks to be decoded via allusions.⁹ This approach has been firmly established with regard to other major modernist works, such as *The Waste Land*, the *Cantos* and *Ulysses*. Inevitably "A"-22 & -23 have been read on the assumption that a recovery of references and source materials will reveal what Zukofsky is actually intending to say. Alison Rieke, for example, has given a painstaking analysis of 15 lines from "A"-23 via its sources—primarily Racine, Jefferson, Peter Kahm, Hawthorne, Cotton Mather and Swift—to reveal a condemnation of the violence of history, particularly against indigenous peoples in American colonial history.¹⁰ Rieke scrupulously recovers the specific passages, then the larger text and even contextual information having no basis in Zukofsky's notes to discover a complex of authorities for a not very complex argument. While it is easy enough to believe Zukofsky held such good liberal sentiments, such readings beg the question of the motivation for its impossibly oblique presentation, which can be accounted for only on the grounds of eccentricity. Why does he choose what Rieke herself insistently refers to as a hermetic, esoteric, secret, hidden manner? Why is there such a yawning gap between what he supposedly wants to say and the actual verbal articulation? Inevitably it has been suggested first by Leggott and echoed by Rieke and others that Zukofsky must have deposited his working notebooks at the University of Texas in anticipation that they would be dug up by scholars as keys to the poems.¹¹ These archival

⁹ This paragraph largely echoes Mark Scroggins critique of source hunting as a key to unlocking Zukofsky's text; *Louis Zukofsky and the Poetry of Knowledge* (1998): 229-236.

¹⁰ Rieke, 201-216. Despite my disagreement with some of their basic interpretive assumptions, both Rieke and Leggott represent pioneering efforts to confront Zukofsky's late poetry that are considerably more helpful than much subsequent discussion.

¹¹ Leggott 3, 52; Rieke 201; Libby Ribkin, *Career Moves: Olson, Creeley, Zukofsky, Berrigan and the American Avant-garde* (2000): 106. The curious and complicated circumstances that saw Zukofsky sell his considerable papers to the Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas, Austin is related by Mark Scroggins, *The Poem of a Life: A Biography of Louis Zukofsky* (2007): 308-311. Zukofsky's primary motive for depositing his papers and

materials do reveal interesting and useful aspects of Zukofsky's poetic practice, as I have attempted to outline above, and for many of us it is difficult to imagine what it is like to read these poems without some outside clues as to his general plan. The *reductio ad absurdum* of the assumption that poems like "A"-22 & -23 are to be read essentially as allusive is the claim that Zukofsky's word fetishism is such as to convince himself that with sufficient sincerity and rigorous craft a single word "quoted" from a passage could evoke its prior sense or context or that the reader is expected to conjure up the full range of dictionary meanings of any given word including etymological associations. Any meaningful account of linguistic fetishism would need to consider the larger socio-historical context of abstraction, reification or what have you, within which Zukofsky and anyone else is writing—an issue with which *Bottom* is much preoccupied.

There is an oddly recurrent claim that the dictionary as a repository of definitions and etymology is crucial, even definitive in grounding the sense of Zukofsky's late poetry. Guy Davenport provides an often repeated anecdote that when he asked Zukofsky the meaning of "mg. dancer" in "A"-21 (465) and offered a handful of possibilities authorized by the dictionary—"a milligram sprite, a magnesium elf, a margin dancer, or Aurora"—the poet answered, "All" (*The Geography of the Imagination* (1981): 103). However, this is an example of Zukofsky's Wittgensteinian remark that "the questions are answered with their own words" (*CSP* 223, *Prep+* 243): how else could he respond to such a query?¹² While Davenport's suggestions are amusing, neither one nor all of them are very helpful in reading the relevant passage. Similarly etymology has often been taken as crucial to cracking Zukofsky's meaning. While, like most modern poets, Zukofsky is quite interested in etymology, he never takes it to be a search for authentic meaning or grounding, as is the case with many modernist thinkers and writers. Strictly speaking, Zukofsky does not believe in etymology in that it is an effort to rationalize the overdetermined tangle of word roots and relations. For Zukofsky etymology merely opens up the individual word to its relations with all others, and he is perfectly happy to welcome false friends as much as those that any dictionary would approve (cf "The Translation," *CSP* 234-239). The idea that any dictionary is a closed text is a peculiar misreading of what a dictionary actually is, and *Thanks to the Dictionary* indicates clearly enough that in the dictionary a word leads to words lead to words and there is no bottom. Less obliquely, in "A"-18 Zukofsky incorporates an extensive quotation from Samuel Johnson's preface to his *Dictionary*, the granddaddy of all dictionaries

working notebooks at Texas was simple, if a tad vulgar: money and the publication of *Bottom*—the first significant payment he ever received for his writing at a time when he and Celia were counting their pennies to determine whether he could retire from teaching to concentrate on finishing his major projects. At the time, the Humanities Center was offering unheard of prices for not only the manu/typescripts and letters of living and often little known authors, but anything else they were willing to throw in. In this regard, Zukofsky was just one of many poets who suddenly found a way to make a buck out of a normally penurious vocation. Zukofsky sold several further batches of papers to the HRC over the course of the rest of his life and Celia sent a further group after his death, plus there were significant additions from the papers of other writers. It is true that the awareness that these papers would end up in an archive may have affected Zukofsky's writing, but the manner of "A"-22 & -23 are a logical development of long established compositional methods and poetic assumptions.

¹² Charles Olson reportedly gave the same response when asked the meaning of "ramp" in the *Maximus* poem that reads in its entirety: "Barbara Ellis, ramp." George F. Butterick, *A Guide to The Maximus Poems of Charles Olson* (1980): 410.

in English, stating that a dictionary is inherently a self-contradictory project (395). Of course a poet such as Zukofsky would affirm, when asked, maximum polysemy, but the real point is that the pursuit of that sort of definitive definition or even set of definitions is off-track, and the dictionary, while immensely suggestive, is insufficient to exhaust the senses in which Zukofsky is interested.¹³

The alternative to source hunting and interpreting “A”-22 & -23 as if the resurfacing of these specific texts will reveal Zukofsky’s meaning is a safely abstract, theoretical characterization, which, however, tends to get into difficulties when attempting to examine the particulars of given passages of the poems. Such characterizations almost always emphasize polysemy, including etymological possibilities, and the short-circuiting of conventional grammar and syntax so that the text can be read, so to speak, simultaneously in a number of directions. In practice, however, this does not seem to inhibit most readers from confidently paraphrasing this or that passage, usually in the form of an unambiguous statement. Such paraphrases tend to end up as a series of meta-poetic statements that, one would think, contradict the supposed fluidity and indeterminacy of the accompanying theoretical claims. In the lyrical framing segments of “A”-22 & -23 there is a discernable poet’s voice that does give the impression of saying various things, offering certain views or statements. It is not by chance that these framing segments have received by far the most detailed examination from commentators, especially the first page of “A”-22, since they seem to offer something academic critics can almost get their hands on. As mentioned, predominantly these paraphrases discover Zukofsky commenting on his own poem, which is to say they echo views we know he expresses elsewhere in his work, and after all “A”-22 & -23 are surely intended as a culmination of “A” specifically and of Zukofsky’s life work generally. This is clearly enough signaled as many have noted in the invocation of the B-A-C-H theme of “A”-12 in the opening lines of “A”-23 and the culminating alphabetized segment at the end and numerous other details where these last movements incorporate or evoke prior work and themes. Similarly the most commented on section of all, the opening of “A”-22, has been confidently read as stating the poet’s indebtedness in recycling other, past materials. While all this is reassuring, it is reassuring because it echoes what we already know. Close examinations of passages from the main bodies of these movements is scarce and usually falls back on detailed source hunting, while considerations of the heavily homophonic passages are exceedingly rare. Any reader will grab what they can, and for the most part only

¹³ A compliment of sorts to Davenport’s anecdote is provided by Zukofsky himself in his note to “Anew” 1, glossing the word “bay,” which has an interesting range of seemingly disparate definitions (*CSP* 103). This in turn has a follow-up in an explanation Zukofsky gave Hugh Kenner in 1975 about “Bayberry” from *80 Flowers*, in which he draws heavily on the dictionary, etymology and homophony in his elaborate word by word commentary. Putting aside the question of how much Zukofsky is pulling Kenner’s leg (he tended to be impish in academic contexts), this commentary certainly indicates his love of the dictionary, but also that any kind of association or connection is legitimate—he designates a number as “private.” In any case, the end result of his explanation is that we have little more idea of what the poem means than we did to begin with: we have some insight into how Zukofsky works but the assumption that this process should or could be mimicked by the reader is rendered absurd. It does indicate, however, an expectation that reading involves an intimate handling of the words and that any relation, association, rhyme, meaningfulness that results is legitimate. Zukofsky’s reading and commentary is available at PennSound, “At Johns Hopkins University, Dec. 13, 1975” <<http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Zukofsky.php>>; Leggott provides a transcript of the commentary on “Bayberry” (369-372).

limited aspects of these poems have offered themselves to critical translation, but perhaps, given the manner of these poems, that is all that can be expected.

Usually these paraphrasing readings are accompanied by claims for the empowerment of the reader, which might be understood as the antithetical response to source hunting and presumably authorize whatever paraphrase one cares to come up with. There is ample evidence for Zukofsky's assumption that the poem is meant to activate the reader is activated as a participant in the meaning making of the poem.¹⁴ But it is not always easy to know whether on the one hand this is merely means the reader must to a greater or lesser degree know "how" to read for there to be reading, and "how" can take on a range of meanings depending on education, experience with poetry and given types of poetry (cf. Pound's "How to Read"). Or, on the other, the reader merely finds whatever they wish or can in the poem, and the most common species of such readings today are those that are sufficiently theoretical that the specific text of the poem can offer no resistance and reveals whatever has already been theoretically predetermined.

III

A"-22 & -23 are in a sense ambitious epic lyrics that attempt to present textual force-fields: on the one hand, the effort to realize the full historical and bodily weight of language, a verbal environment giving the effect of such density, however absurd that ambition may be; while on the other, the dead weight of the text requires the activation of the reader which implies a process of recognition and recurrence, in other words Spinozian image association and flourishing. In many respects the strategy of these poems seems intent on deflecting conventions and habits of grammar and syntax so that the reading cannot settle but instead generates all manner of oblique associations. Zukofsky's insistence on the literal text that is eyed and eared manifests itself here in a text that constantly undoes itself in the sense of stable semantic meaning in order to maintain the multiplication of possible relations. We might for a moment consider "A"-22 & -23 as logical extensions of Canto I. Pound's historically layered text, tracing back to some primordial ritualistic enactment, implies that, beyond the commonplace idea of translation's role in textual transmission, translation is necessarily implicated in all writing or language. However, Pound carefully maintains a distinction between the layers of historical sedimentation that represent distinct although interpenetrating linguistic cultures and epic traditions in order that the reader register a clear sense of historical narrative, which is necessary for the larger arguments of the *Cantos*. But we might imagine the result if all the historical linguistic complexity and relations embedded in those sedimented layers were allowed to float up into a paratactic textual space without narrative or other hypotactic structures, where everything is simultaneously present—"an era any time of year." The result might well look and sound like "A"-22 & -23. They aspire to evoke the presence of textual culture across all languages and times implied in any given word of any given language. In this case, the 6000 years of textual materials are simply a programmatic way to gesture toward texts as thoroughly overdetermined. Textual transmutations via the method of homophonic suggestion (or translation) work in those interstices where all languages interpenetrate, abut on each other, indeed, are inextricable beneath or beyond the epiphenomena of linguistic codification with its requisite armies and

¹⁴ Variations on this argument are made by Don Byrd, "Getting Ready to Read 'A'," *boundary 2* 10.2 (Winter 1982): 291-292; Bruce Comens, *Apocalypse and After: Modern Strategy and Postmodern Tactics in Pound, Williams, and Zukofsky* (1995): 178-179; Mark Scroggins, *Louis Zukofsky and the Poetry of Knowledge* (1998): 252-254; Tim Woods, *The Poetics of the Limit: Ethics and Politics in Modern and Contemporary American Poetry* (2002).

navies. We might think of this poetry as working in or gesturing toward that space called Language, necessarily assumed by the possibility of translation in the first place, which harbors any language's identity with any other (*langue*) as well as all their possible unique manifestations (*parole*). This suggests that "A"-22 to "A"-23 pursue a trajectory toward that ideal space where all languages fold into each other such that the pervasive intentionality that desires friendship with others is felt and where the working with the materials of languages (writing and reading) enacts that commonality.

Among the notes from Zukofsky's late notebooks that Leggott reproduces is a particularly intriguing cluster on "a" and "the." One might think that Zukofsky would privilege "the" over "a"—the particular or individual with deictic implications over one of several or many that always implies a generality, a category or group that defines the individual sample. Yet Zukofsky had long committed himself to "a." The note shifts this question from the narrowly semantic to the rhetorical and performative: "a" is "possibility" while "the" is "predatory insistence???" (Leggott 49). It is the implications of their use that primarily concern Zukofsky here, so "a" indicates suggestion, the not yet definitive, alternative instances, engaging the other in dialogue, while "the" has imperative implications, suggesting fixity and completeness, finishing the discussion. Leggott's primary interest in her remarks on this note is in the suggestion of "*anhistorical*" as a gloss on the well-known lines near the beginning of "A"-22 expressing the desire to empty history of names (511.18-19), implying a sense of history without narrative logic or teleology, lacking specific protagonists as well as originating or linked events. The cluster note also quotes a line from "A"-18: "'An': faring no cause to an unowned end:" whose immediately preceding companion is: "an order out of hiatus joining a chain:" (393.36-37). It is difficult not to read these lines as meta-critically commenting on the "order" of "A". History, if we can still call this history, is conceived here as improvisational possibilities where all the unfulfilled possibilities of the past remain present—an era any time of year. If we read the two lines from "A"-18 as a pair, then they are simultaneously complementary and antithetical. The first line begins with "an order" and ends with "a chain" with "hiatus" in between—an apt description of the loose sequence that is "A", particularly given the qualifying indefinite articles, but one that emphasizes an order tending toward entrapment in narrative chains. The second, however, suggests there is no origin or end, which at the very least puts into question the authority or narrative logic of any such chain. "An" does not allow one to establish origins or ends, only to suggest a possible instance—an origin, a cause, an end. "An unowned end" presumably belongs to no one and therefore to everyone, and again we find Zukofsky's focus on the details of language generating social allegories. But this means as well that neither the poet nor the reader own the end that is the poem. The note extends the implications to the political or ideological, as Leggott suggests, by giving the example of "Stalin—the Stalin." On the one hand this can be understood simply enough as saying Stalin is an example the dangers of "the," the tyranny of the definitive and imperative, and from this perspective is interesting in that Zukofsky long defended Stalin on pragmatic grounds. Can we detect an element of self-correction here? On the other hand, this does not seem to be primarily what the example is exemplifying since it deliberately juxtaposes a name with a name turned into a noun by the definite article. In other words, it is an example of use and points less to the historical-biographical individual than the rhetorical use of "Stalin": "Stalin" as a figure of possibility from the perspective of a Communist fellow traveler in the 1930s versus "*the Stalin*" of Cold War rhetoric. Or perhaps the point is to contrast "Stalin" as a name, word, phonemes to what those letters and sound combination have come to signify—somewhat like the impossibility giving a child the name Adolf after World War II. While the main bodies of both "A"-22 and -23 include no names in the strict sense, they nevertheless pop up in the form of puns (e.g.

“hero dotes” (Herodotus), “Pith or gore has” (Pythagoras) and so on), so that the names do not become a fixed reference but are literally opened up so as to set off further relations. The name, then, is returned to its status as a word(s) within the textual body rather than allowing it to stand out and organize its textual surroundings around it, like Stevens’ jar in Tennessee where it is not just that jar but the name that organizes the wilderness around it. We see here a striking example of how the seemingly particular and specific, in the form of a proper name, actually functions abstractly to impose itself to limit the text as active possibility when we forget or repress the fact that the name is textual.

The logic of Zukofsky’s poetic development was not so much to compact as much semantic meaning as possible into his late poetry but to empty it out in order to bring other aspects into greater play. Meaningfulness is less in what one says than in the act of saying (or reading), which expresses the desire to be with others, even if what one “says” is hate for all humanity or a nihilistic view of existence. For all the ambition seemingly implicit in reading and working in materials across 6000 years of literate culture, in the end this is little more than a working plan, a scaffolding that would be not so much kicked away as dissolved into a poetic text unconcerned with signaling its indebtedness or erudition because there is no ownership. Although Joyce’s Oxen of the Sun chapter appears an obvious precedent, Zukofsky’s chronological presentation does not generate narrative assumptions. The surface detail of these texts is quite various, not simply in terms of content (if that is the right way to put it) but with regard to tonal and stylistic variation at a local level. However, as one attempts to rise to a higher level of sequential development, the surface in fact appears very much the same in its oblique diversity. The actual reading experience is likely to be the other way around: initially the text tends to rush over one as a bewildering sameness and only gradually does one accustom oneself to identifying the local variations and landmarks. No effort is made to systematically signal the specific historicity of individual source texts, and the occasional interpolation of historical translations, such of Plutarch and Boethius in Queen Elizabeth’s verse translations, only further mixes up any sense of historical sequencing. Because Zukofsky chooses to work chronologically, the imagery of his material does in a general way signal historical stages. This is most evident in the early pages of the main body of “A”-22, which as mentioned move from the birth of a new island to geological and then predominately natural history materials, followed by various “primitive” culture documents and then to more sophisticated, that is urban cultures, and this movement is generally evident in the specific imagery available from the source materials. However, it would be difficult to sustain this evolutionary reading in detail, particularly past the first few pages. Zukofsky is more interested in the interpenetration of different times as they exist now in the act of reading. His conception is more spherical than sequential, all languages or texts across time abutting and overlaying each other. The birth of an island with which the main body of “A”-22 begins comes from a newspaper ad for a TV program on a sudden upthrust of new earth above the surface of the ocean off Iceland. It is as if a primordial event or presence bursts forth into the present—and as such is available for obviously pertinent allegorical readings—but strictly speaking it is both contemporary and exists as text (recorded). The supposed aspiration to incorporate materials over a 6000 year period, simply designates literate (textual) culture or history proper, although in fact Zukofsky includes significant pre-literate materials, which of course only exist for us as textual artifacts. There is no reason to believe that he could not have selected these materials according to an entirely chance method applied to the newspaper, since any language is heavily sedimented, yet still have ended up with essentially a similar poetic texture. For Zukofsky, setting himself the task of reading across millennia of textual materials, including texts in languages he did not “know” but nevertheless “read,” was an excuse to read those books on the shelf he had been meaning to

get around to, but more importantly was a means of sounding a wide range and diversity of materials as a preparatory exercise for composition. All texts are historical, but the problem is that Zukofsky's practice de-historicizes them by taking the "the" out, so that there is no argumentative principle according to which the reader can organize the result.

Faced with the question of whether "A"-22 & -23 are, then, anything more than radically nominalistic, an arbitrary collection of scattered jotting, we can turn to a possible model found in *Bottom*. This particular passage has a certain authority given that Zukofsky read it into a talk, "About the Gas Age," that he later included as the last words of the expanded edition of *Prepositions* (1981)—not counting the index.¹⁵ The passage quoted is fairly long and well worth examining in detail, but I will concentrate only on the shorter second paragraph, which offers more than enough to chew on:

Under the aspect of eternity, where all things exist equally with the same force as when they began to exist, nothing of the mutual need of course be *said*; thought is only conflation of extension, and extension of thought, *until* the bass-string of humility is suddenly aware of the presumption of having said something about the holiness of the treble. And then without reference to an all's equal, external existence art exists in agitation and activity where no human sense is cut off from another and netted in whatever *Ethics* such an organism as Spinoza can produce, or be increased or diminished by, "in so far as it is understood by his nature." (*Prep+* 172, *Bottom* 423-424)

This is obviously heavily informed by Spinoza and can be understood as an attempt to situate the text or work of art within the model provided by the *Ethics*. The two well-known quoted phrases that open and close the paragraph—"under the aspect of eternity" and "in so far as it is understood by his nature"—encapsulate Spinoza's dual perspective: that of God or the totality and that of any given entity that exists and participates in that totality (nature as creative, nature as created). Zukofsky's paragraph plays between these perspectives which are not alternatives but necessarily implicate each other. From the perspective of God or of utopia, everything is absolutely equal (individual, unique) and absolutely inter-related to everything else (mutual), and the text or art work (external existence art) exists actively to enhance the harmony of the reader-viewer within the totality. As such this paraphrase does not say very much, but as always in *Bottom* and elsewhere in Zukofsky's writing we need to consider closely not so much what he says but how he says it. The first sentence is a version of the fall: one speaks eternity or utopia and in doing so one creates division, violates the whole—the "mutual" is immanent so the act of language introduces the distinction between mutual and difference. For example, evoking a state where "no human sense is cut off from another" already assumes the fallen state of the division of the senses, which can be understood as both a lack of bodily harmony and a scattering of meanings. The final clause of the first sentence mimics this division by placing the mirroring phrases "the bass-string of humility" and "the holiness of the treble" at opposite ends of the long clause, although the musical metaphor is senseless unless they are one. Zukofsky did not *believe* in myths of the fall or of origins, yet such myths everywhere inhabit our writing and thinking. We participate in eternity only as transitory beings ("according to our nature"), but eternity is not mere mystification to the extent that we necessarily exist in and through the totality. The state of

¹⁵ The expanded 1981 version of *Prepositions* had Zukofsky's authorization, even though it was published a few years after his death. He added three pieces, one to each section of the volume, plus the "Index of definitions." The latter consists almost entirely of nouns and like "A"-22 & -23 is emptied of proper names, except for a couple of exceptions just to avoid predictability. The definitions are simply the various uses of the indexed words.

“activity where no human sense is cut off from another” indicates the horizon of full realization in terms of the Spinozian model, in which any entity endeavors to realize itself—to maximize its reality, activity, power, perfection. Throughout *Bottom* and everywhere else in Zukofsky, “sense” is a ubiquitous term because it enfolds both sense perception and meaning, or in Spinozian terms extension (body) and thought. These terms are not to be conceived of as separate faculties within a human entity but as distinct but strictly parallel perceptions or articulations of a given human event—any thought always already implies a bodily experience and vice versa or as Zukofsky puts it they are “conflations” of each other. These parallel attributes (in Spinoza’s terminology) are determined by the nature or definition of being human—although in the totality (God-Nature) there are infinite potential attributes, humans only have access to or the capability to conceive in terms of extension and thought. “No human sense cut off from another” simultaneously designates body (extension) and thought, but also inside and outside—the realization of the individual is necessarily mutual with the realization of others, and the “senses” always designate relations, contact points between inside and out, self and others, signifier and signified, in other words is always social or collective (mutual). But as mentioned, saying no sense is cut off from another already implies their division, and, as with the first sentence, the latter part of this second sentence tends to fall away from eternity, ending with our natures which are very limited participants in the eternity where the sentence began, as already indicated by mention of diminishment as well as increase in the preceding clause. So these two sentences figure an elaborate allegory of the human as always situated within mutually defining antitheses, which is played out in the figures of the sentences themselves. Zukofsky or Spinoza conceives of the human as necessarily desiring and endeavoring to realize an ideal equilibrium or harmony according to our natures within this contradictory and contentious model—in a sense an endless task of reading. While the work or text (external existence art) has its own integrity as an entity, it participates in the mutual task of self-realization and from the perspective of the human aspires to enhance the human, that state where no sense is cut off from another.

To suggest that “A”-22 & 23 were written “under the aspect of eternity”—quotations transmuted out of their prior contexts to create their own recontextualization that highlights the integrity of their particulars as well as their sensual resonances and associations—is not to assert that they realize, visualize or represent such a perspective so much as that they activate such desire, which cannot but elicit the recognition that this eternity is shot through with Shakespeare’s sense of the tragic. These poems are clearly utopian in intent, and apparently in his notebooks Zukofsky expresses the desire to rework his found materials to include only the good and avoid the hurtful (notes quoted in Leggott 56-57). Yet in practice it is obvious he made no attempt to thoroughly comb out the hurt, as there remains plenty of dissonance, but then the utopian is where it is possible to imagine community where dissonance is integral to the harmony. The utopian is the activation of that desire so as to reflect on and situate oneself within the present with regard to the possible. In “A”-22 & -23 Zukofsky constructs a sensuous and resonating poetic body that is simultaneously pleasurable on the level of sensation and compounds associations throughout the larger text of the movement and beyond, a text dense with intentionality. This was not a fetishism of the word (mot juste) or image (“luminous detail”), but rather the compounding of relations, associations, recurrences—activating an infinite reserve of nuance and relations. No amount of thumbing the dictionaries is going to exhaust the senses here implied. For Zukofsky this handling of language is neither merely subjective nor idealist (spiritual), since words as material objects carry the traces of their impossibly complicated relations of use, all of which potentially but selectively comes into play for any given writer-reader. An intimate engagement with the text is an activation of the reader by and in the resonances and recurrences set off in the

encounter. The poem is not immune to conceptuality or allegorization; indeed, it tends to generate too much at any given moment and never allows any particular organizing concept to order our reading of the poem. However, the negative, dissociative principle of such a text is always present (perhaps overwhelmingly so for most readers), as we saw repeatedly enacted in the paragraph from *Bottom*. Zukofsky's privileged term "recurrence" is both a figure and a trope of figuration, of a chain of associations without ground or end. If we consider "A"-22 & -23 as written under the aspect of eternity, we note a high degree of nominalization—an unusual egalitarianism among the individual words (as Rieke has pointed out heavily tilted toward nouns (196-200)) even extending to phonemes, syllables and letters. Yet the text is not mere scattered words and pure contingency, as it is clearly extensively worked—perhaps most obviously in its sonic aspect which would seem fundamental to any definition of poetry. The unity or identity of the poem is on the one hand merely a matter of its physical presentation but on the other lies in this very principle of equality that immanently implies the interrelation of everything with everything else—the mutual that need not be said. Although I have said, echoing Zukofsky and any number of other commentators, that the principle of coherence is recurrence and association, in actual fact if that means repetition with variation of certain images or themes then there is not enough in these texts to offer a convincing sense of unity. This is not to say that such recurrences—of say flowers and horses, or time and change—are not present and important but that they hardly seem sufficient. The associations and possibilities Zukofsky is groping for arise out of a close handling of the words and sounds, which one could validly identify with his "Objectivist" sense of "sincerity," but ultimately they lack any grounding other than the poet's sense of activation, of inklings of the realization of that state where no sense is cut off from another. The words and their combinations are acted on and act on the poet within the active context of the totality. In this respect they have no bottom, yet are mutual.

When we read (eye and sound) "Humus / Humider flowers" (yanked out of context), what do we see and hear? Humus, earth, humidity, the basic elements (earth, water, words) required by flowers (life, poems). Perhaps we hear as well "human" (myths of our earthly or even watery origin) and "humor" (in fact etymologically related to humidity) or even "hum" (of bees or of language). We might get even a bit cuter and see "humid-" leading into "flow-." At what point does conceptualization begin to separate out from perception? The text seems deliberately designed to evoke only to thwart full conceptualization—to state the matter conceptually. Particularly given the crucial and, in the accompanying phrases and lines, reiterated image of flowers, all manner of metaphoric as well as metonymic possibilities are suggested, but neither seems capable of taming and grounding the other. This indicates why any acceptable critical exegesis of "A"-22 & -23 is problematic, that is, deflected by Zukofsky's text, which if it does not deflect the reader away altogether, tends to work further angles the text might suggest. This is what we vaguely designate play, which is based on the perception in recurrences of unexpected or unintended differences—the pun and rhyme being exemplary. However, how could we ever feel certain how this humming phrase relates to the following "candid lily carpet," joined together or separated by a colon. We have the flower connection, we have a pair of three word phrases, we have alliterative parallels, we have possible etymological networks. Does knowing that these phrases are worked from Ovid help or that they fit into a chronological sequence of Roman era materials? Actually, if we dig up the full sources of these three plus lines, they become easy to interpret, especially since the epigram by Crinagoras is for a wedding (or birthday), so this event and the beauty of the bride counters the significance of the mid-winter time when it is taking place, which in turn

gives the optimistic counter-balance to the fallen flowers-women in Ovid and Persius.¹⁶ This might very well explain why Zukofsky chose to bring these three passages together, so that we have a neat little narrative of transience, death, violence which is resolved by marriage and birth—winter holds the promise of spring. One could hardly come up with a more venerable literary and indeed cultural narrative, yet the problem is that stating it as a theme renders it banal. If this theme is important to Zukofsky—and it is simply because you cannot write and read without it cropping up everywhere—his interest is in submerging any such temptation toward such abstract moralizing into the visceral texture of the words. It is conceivable that a reader could divine this thematic meaning from Zukofsky's text given that any flowers have the potential to conjure any number of such archetypal cultural associations, just as Hugh Kenner finds the Persephone myth behind the images of Pound's "In a Station at the Metro" (*Pound Era* (1971): 184-185). This only foregrounds the peculiarity of Zukofsky's text, which renders embarrassing either the reading or the poetry. It is only in the action of the reading that this poetry can make sense, as a sense making activity. And it does or can make sense because the act of reading assumes that Spinozian totality where everything must be interrelated and mutual, and because implicit in the act of reading is the endeavor to realize one's being necessarily with others. The text is activating that action rather than getting us to any moral.

The concluding passage of "A"-23 has naturally been read as drawing together and rounding off of all the various concerns of the movement and of "A" generally.¹⁷ 26 lines tap out an ABC threading various names, images and themes—such as Bach, music, gardens and sawhorses—that have figured prominently throughout the many pages of the poem and can mostly, if not entirely be associated with the paradisaical and contented. Zukofsky's always available image of unity, his own family, is written in as a series of numbers that encode the three members birthdays, as quotations from some liner notes by Paul from his recording of Pagannini's *Caprices*, as an obvious reference in the third to the last line to "A"-24 assembled by Celia out of Louis' own texts and finally as the last line, "z-sited path are but us," which manages to punningly encode Paul's then current address on Arbutus Road into a statement that all these years of writing has led to or been made out of the affirmation of the family itself. A good many of these details require some outside briefing to be read into the text, but nonetheless any reader well acquainted with "A" generally can recognize enough familiar themes-images to feel this passage offers a clear sense of tying up. It is worth considering a contrary reading, however, because this ending is no less precarious than any of the rest of "A"-22 & -23. To the degree that Zukofsky is highlighting the alphabet as an organizing principle of this passage, it not only reflects back on the literal materials out of which the poem is necessarily constructed and generated but also that it is nothing more. The alphabetical presentation is odd, and since Zukofsky's compositional technique is agrammatical, there is little technical difficulty or challenge in weaving words beginning with the appropriate letter in the appropriate order over the course of the passage. The first three lines begin respectively with ABC but thereafter the letters are scattered about. Initially (through H) they are all capitalized but then only more intermittently and by the time we get to Y, it appears as the terminal letter of "story" rather than as an initial letter of a word as in

¹⁶ The translation of the full epigram by Crinagoras is as follows: "Roses used to flower in spring, but we now in mid-winter burst scarlet from our buds, smiling gaily on this thy natal morn that falls so nigh to thy wedding. To be seen on the brow of the loveliest of women is better than to await the sun of spring" (trans. W.R. Paton).

¹⁷ Scroggins offers a detailed annotation of the concluding segment of "A"-23 as a summarizing piece in *Louis Zukofsky and the Poetry of Knowledge* (1998): 245-251.

all other cases. The point is that for a poet like Zukofsky there would be no difficulty beginning each of the 26 lines with the appropriate letter in order, or capitalizing each letter in order, or having them at least as the initial letters of words, or having the sequence of letter match the 26 lines, but he chooses not to, instead allowing this game to all but disappear back into the text except to finish it off with the last letter in the last line. There is nothing determinative about this particular formal exercise other than to highlight that it is all made out of letters, but letters are not mere letters. Like Zukofsky's admiration that Spinoza could elaborate the complex that is the *Ethics* out of a few definitions ("A"-13.312-313, *Prep+* 170), the alphabet exemplifies the infinite structures we compose out of "simples," not merely in texts and poems but in our living. The letters, it need hardly be said, are mutual, they imply and interrelate to each other and everything else. Despite the appearance of a good many clear recurrences in this final passage of images and themes familiar throughout "A", this is not the case with many others, and I doubt if anyone could definitively account for them all. More to the point is the very explicit action of weaving words that hardly pretend to cover up their arbitrariness. Let me hasten to add, however, these are not alternative readings—neatly tying things up in the bosom of the family on the one hand or noting the simple arbitrariness of it all on the other—since they rely on and implicate each other. The final "us" is less the family than poem and reader—the latter has pursued a "z-sided path" as the text designated "Zukofsky" but then again that path is only what the reader has made of it. It could hardly be otherwise. It is a typically Zukofskian exercise proposing a set order, which at the same time could have been carried out in any number of other ways. But it highlights and makes final use of the alphabet which in a sense is the ultimate restraining form of the poem itself, unavoidable yet infinitely variable and the storehouse of vast libraries of cultural inheritance. The family is that imagined but not imaginary community that we must assume for any alphabet to operate, within and with which we are activated and can act to make meaningfulness together.

10 Oct. 2013

Appendix to “A”-22 & -23

The following lists are intended to offer a sketch map of the sources Zukofsky used in the main bodies of “A”-22 & -23 in the order in which they are used. I have often grouped multiple sources to help see the larger segments of the movements in terms of the sources used. There remain significant gaps where the sources are as yet unidentified; nevertheless, it is complete enough to see their diversity and Zukofsky’s general plan. Distinct authors or sources are separated by semicolons, whereas a comma indicates the following source for the preceding author (e.g. Mencius, *Wisdom of China and India*, ed. Lin Yutang) or the specific work by the author (e.g. Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*).

“A”-22

- 512.3-513.17: Sir Charles Lyell, *Geographical Evidence of the Antiquity of Man* (1863) and Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams*, chapters 15 (Darwinism) and 26 (Twilight).
- 513.18- 515.9: Numa Denis Fustel de Coulanges, *The Ancient City* (1864); Andrew Sharp, *Ancient Voyagers in the Pacific* (1957); C.M. Bowra, *Primitive Song* (1962); Peter Kahm, *Travels in North America* (1753-1761); Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1784); *Shaking the Pumpkin: Traditional Poetry of the Indian North Americans*, ed. Jerome Rothenberg (1972); Marcel Griaule, *Conversations with Ogotemeli: An Introduction to Dogon Religious Ideas* (1965).
- 515.10-32: Herbert Giles, *A History of Chinese Literature* (1901), misc. ancient Chinese historical and philosophical texts.
- 516.1-4: 1 Samuel.
- 516.8-19: Lao Tzu.
- 516.23-517.2: Xenophanes; Herodotus (5th century BC).
- 517.4-519.14: Pre-Socratic philosophers, Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*; Confucius, Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilisation in China*, Vol. 2 (1956); Plato, *Epistles*.
- 519.15-520.22: Mencius, *Wisdom of China and India*, ed. Lin Yutang; Han Fei Tzū, Giles; Chuang Tzu; Aristotle (3rd-4th century BC).
- 520.23-521.15: Theophrastus, *Enquiry into Plants* (3rd century BC).
- 521.15-33: Pyrrho; Euclid (3rd century BC).
- 522.1-21: Epicurus, Diogenes Laertius (3rd century BC).
- 522.25-30: Livy, Machiavelli’s *Discourses on the First Ten Books of Titus Livius* (1st century BC).
- 522.36-523.2: Lu Wên-shu, Giles (1st century BC).
- 523.3-10: Talmud.
- 523.10-18: Philo of Alexandria; Strabo (1st century BC).
- 523.20-24: Yoga aphorisms of Patanjali, *Wisdom of India and China*.
- 523.25-524.4: mostly Josephus, also Pliny the Elder, Book of John and Tacitus (1st century).
- 524.4-7: Yang Hsiung, Giles (1st century BC).
- 524.12-30: Philostratus, *Life of Apollonius of Tyana* (1st/2nd century).
- 524.35-525.16: Talmud.
- 525.17-29: Lucian (2nd century).
- 525.30-526.3: Plotinus (3rd century).
- 526.4-17: misc. Chinese prose and poetry, Giles (5th-7th centuries).
- 526.20-23: Jacob Boehme.

526.31-527.3: Ssü-K'ung T'u; Su Shih, Giles (9th and 11th centuries)
 527.4-13: John Collier, *The Indians of the Americas, The Long Hope* (1948).
 527.24-528.5: Harold Lamb, *Genghis Khan: The Emperor of All Men* (1928) (12th-13th centuries).
 528.12-15: William Blake.
 528.16-18: Abraham Abulafia (13th century).
 528.19-34: mostly Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*; also Gemistus Pletho (14th-15th centuries).
 528.34-37: Liu Chi, Giles (14th century).
 529.10-530.10: Da Vinci; Michelangelo; Raphael, Vasari, *Lives of the Painters, Sculptors and Architects* (15th-16th centuries).
 530.20-29: Edmund Spenser, Camoes, Sir Francis Drake, Shakespeare (16th century).
 530.37-531.30: English Renaissance prose writers, esp. Robert Burton and Thomas Browne; also William Harvey; Robert Boyle; Andrew Fletcher (16th-17th centuries).
 531.31-34: Pascal (17th century).
 531.34-532.2: John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester; Leibniz (17th century)
 532.3-17: Swift, *A Tale of a Tub*; Voltaire; Bach; Helvetius; Diderot (18th century).
 532.17-24: Edward Gibbon, *A Vindication* (1779).
 532.24-33: Thomas Jefferson; Lichtenberg; Darwin; Brillat-Savarin; Goethe; Marx; Faraday.

- 539.8-24: Arapaho (native American), Aranda (Australian aboriginal) and other details from C.M. Bowra, *Primitive Song*.
- 539.32-34: *Fountain of Old Poems, The White Pony: An Anthology of Chinese Poetry*, ed. Robert Payne.
- 540.6-543.31: *Gilgamesh*, with parenthetical interpolation from the Rig Veda.
- 543.32-36: Rig Veda.
- 543.37-544.2: Psalm 96.
- 544.3-13, Homer, *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.
- 544.13-25: Hesiod
- 544.26-28: Hymn of the Arval Brethren (archaic Latin)
- 544.30-545.6: mostly Joel, also Homeric Hymn to Apollo.
- 545.15-20: Homeric Hymn to Pythian Apollo.
- 545.20-36: first Isaiah; Micah; Zephaniah.
- 545.36-546.33: Homeric Hymns to Demeter, Mercury (translations by Chapman and Shelley), Earth the Mother of All, Sun, plus Sappho.
- 546.33-547.29: Jeremiah; Lamentations; Habakkuk.
- 547.30-548.29: Ezekiel.
- 548.30-549.19: Obadiah; Zechariah; second Isaiah (including a reworking of Isaiah by Robert Herrick); Haggai; Malachi; Psalm 137.
- 549.21-23: Semonides of Ceos and Bacchylides (7th-5th century BC).
- 549.31-550.17: Aeschylus, Orphic Mysteries, Euripides, Aristophanes (5th century BC).
- 550.22-29: Callimachus; Leonidas of Tarentum; Antipater, *Greek Anthology* (3rd-2nd centuries BC).
- 550.32-35: Ch'ü Yüan, Giles and *The White Pony* (4th century BC).
- 551.8-9: Plautus (2nd-3rd centuries BC).
- 551.10-12: Moschus; Bion; Meleager (2nd-1st centuries BC).
- 551.13-14: Hebrew *Pirke Avot* and Talmud.
- 551.14-24: Terence; Virgil; Horace (translated by Queen Elizabeth); Ovid; Persius; Crinagoras of Mitylene (2nd century BC-1st century).
- 551.25-552.15: Martial (1st century).
- 552.15-31: Statius; Plutarch (translated by Queen Elizabeth); Juvenal; Philippus of Thessalonica (1st-2nd centuries).
- 552.31-553.1: Shakespeare, “The Passionate Pilgrime.”
- 553.1-3: Lactantius and Pentadius (3rd-4th centuries).
- 553.4-14: Greek prose romances: Dio Chrysostom; Longus; Xenophon of Ephesus (1st-3rd centuries).
- 553.16-17: *Greek Anthology*.
- 553.18-22: Shakespeare, *Hamlet*.
- 553.22-30: Palladas, *Greek Anthology* (4th century).
- 553.33-554.4: T'ao Yüan-ming (T'ao Ch'ien), *The White Pony* and *Penguin Book of Chinese Verse* (4th-5th centuries).
- 554.6-37: interlude describing the Zukofskys' gardens at their Long Island home.
- 555.1-10: Apuleius, Cupid and Psyche episode from the *Golden Ass* (2nd century).
- 555.10-13: *Pervigilium Veneris* (4th century?).
- 555.13-33: Boethius (translated by Queen Elizabeth) (6th century).
- 555.34-556.10: Ernest Fenollosa, *Epochs of Chinese and Japanese Art* (1912); *Mabinogion*.

556.10-557.13: Old English poetry: *Beowulf*; Widsith; two charms; Deor; The Dream of the Rood; The Wanderer; riddles; interpolation of Li Shih-ming, *The White Pony* (7th century).

557.16-24: medieval Welsh poetry (9th-12th centuries).

557.25-29: Chinese drama, Giles; *Greenlanders Saga*.

557.30-558.12: Haggadah; Hebrew prayer book; Solomon ibn Gabriol (11th century).

558.12-34: Chaucer; *Poem of the Cid*; French mystery play; Provençal poets (Bernart de Ventadorn, Jaufre Rudel, Giraut de Bornelh, Raimbaut d'Aurenga, Peire Vidal); Dante; with parenthetical interpolation from the *Whole Earth Catalog* (12th-14th centuries).

559.1-6: medieval philosophers: John of Salisbury, Richard of St. Victor, Adam de Saint-Victor (12th century).

559.6-21: St. Francis of Assisi, various sources including Henry Adams, *Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres* (13th century).

559.21-33: Dante; Robert Grosseteste; Cavalcanti (13th century).

559.34-560.2: *Mabinogion*; medieval Welsh poetry (14th century).

560.3-17: Chaucer; William Langland, *Piers Plowman* (14th century).

560.18-19: Juan Ruiz (14th century).

560.22-29: Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*; Nadezhda Mandelstam, *Hope Against Hope*.

560.30-561.6: Wakefield mystery plays; Dafydd ap Edmwnd; Rabelais; Luis De Leon; Sir Thomas Wyatt; Tudor Aled; Edmund Spenser (15th-16th centuries).

561.6-19: Luis de Gongora; Lope de Vega; Francisco de Quevedo; Pedro Calderon; Beaumont and Fletcher; George Herbert; Sir Thomas Browne (16th-17th centuries).

561.19-27: Racine; Thomas Jefferson; Peter Kalm; Cotton Mather; Nathaniel Hawthorne; Thoreau (17th-19th centuries).

561.28-36: Jonathan Swift (18th century).

561.37- 562.35: Laurence Sterne; Horace Walpole; Gilbert White; J.S. Bach; Christopher Smart, Coleridge, Robert Browning, Charles Dickens, Goethe, Jules Laforgue, Thomas Hood, Charles Lamb, William Hazlitt, Heinrich Heine; Arthur Rimbaud, André Chénier, Thomas Hardy, Victor Hugo, Darwin, Pound (18th-20th centuries).