

As has been often recognized, "A" has two endings: "A"-24 and "A"-22 & 23. Zukofsky himself legitimized such alternative readings by carefully dating the individual movements of "A" in the table of contents, so that while the sequential progression and chronology generally coincide, there are significant points of divergence. Critical discussion predominantly takes "A"-22 & 23 as the proper culmination of "A", whereas "A"-24 only occasionally receives more than cursory attention. The reasons for this are not particularly mysterious. First of all, there is the question of how to talk about "A"-24 as the completion of Zukofsky's major work when it was composed by his wife Celia, apparently without his knowledge. The particular nature of Celia's authorship makes it irresolvable whether "A"-24, which she did not create with the intention of being a part of "A", is to be understood as her own creative response to her husband's work, or her interpretation of what she thinks he means by his work, or as a creative fulfillment of various hints expressed by Louis over the years. There is also the problem of reading "A"-24 on the page, at best a difficult exercise, when it is presented as properly a performance text, which poses further problems of how to talk about "A"-24 as a part of "A". On the other hand, younger poets of an experimental inclination have naturally preferred the dense and intricate textual weave of "A"-22 & 23 as the logical climax of Zukofsky's poetic endeavors and as an anticipation of the direction of their own work.<sup>2</sup>

Usually when commenting on "A"-24, the peculiarity of Celia's authorship is acknowledged only to be quickly put aside so that the discussion can proceed as if it is an extension of Louis' intentions. While keeping Celia's active role in view, I want to argue that this latter assumption is not unreasonable: by considering "A"-24 in the larger context of "A" and the rest of Louis' major works, it is plausible that this final movement fulfills fundamental assumptions of Louis' long-held poetic principles. Celia was Louis' ideal reader—she was not merely proximate but was deeply involved in his work throughout their lives together. Celia typed his manuscripts (Louis never typed), published works (*First Half of "A"-9*, *A Test of Poetry*, *Barely and widely*), edited a selection of short poems (*16 Once Published*), was his bibliographer (which beyond the bibliography published in 1969 involved gathering an impressive amount of secondary materials, including every public mention of Zukofsky), and of course there were various collaborative projects, which Louis actively encouraged. With the designation of *L.Z. Masque* as "A"-24, Louis confirmed Celia's presence in all of his three major works: "A", *Bottom* and *Catullus*. There were further smaller-scale projects which involved musical settings or adaptations of Louis' poetry: *Autobiography* (1970) is a selection of short poems determined by those for which Celia had composed musical settings over many years, which puts an interesting spin on the idea of autobiography; the self-published "A" *Libretto* (1965) selects passages from

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<sup>1</sup> This commentary, in a slightly altered version, first appeared in *Golden Handcuffs Review* 14 (Winter-Spring 2011), along with two other essays on "A"-24: Jeff Hilson, "From A-Z and Bach Again: Getting a Handel on 'A'-24" and Richard Parker, "Canto 75 vs. 'A'-24." Thanks to Lou Rowan for permission to reprint and to Richard Parker for organizing the seminar at the Centre for Modernist Studies at the University of Sussex (23 Jan. 2009) that instigated these and other considerations of "A"-24.

<sup>2</sup> However, some of these same poets were the first to seriously engage with "A"-24 through performing it. See the Zukofsky page at PennSound for recordings of two performances of "A"-24 in 1978 by Steve Benson, Carla Harryman, Lyn Hejinian, Kit Robinson, Bob Perelman and Barrett Watten

throughout “A” arranged to be sung by several voices: Chorus, Narrator, Male and Female; and after Louis’ death she produced a small volume, *American Friends*, which juxtaposes short quotations from Louis with those from various American writers. This incomplete catalogue of Celia’s diverse involvements with her husband’s work is merely intended as short-hand for the unusual intimacy she had with Louis’ textual body. Yet while Celia’s activities have often enough been noted, discussion rarely goes further than that. Virtually no one has discussed the linkage between the two volumes of *Bottom*, Celia herself has repeatedly encouraged the view that her part in *Catullus* was merely the spade work of producing the trots for the Latin from which Louis did the creative work and, as mentioned, even “A”-24 has proven awkward to talk about unless considered as if written by Louis.

However, if we are to understand Celia’s participation in and with Louis’ work as something more than sentimental, we need to recognize a sense of collaboration fundamental to Zukofsky’s entire method of composition, which is most essentially and persistently the self-conscious rewriting of found materials. Writing is always rewriting, and in the case of Zukofsky this principle needs to be given a constructivist emphasis: the rearrangement and reworking of found texts. As such, the task of the individual poet is co-operative with pre-given textual materials, which for Zukofsky involves the recognition of the cultural labor sedimented within any text—the epos that lies in even the most seemingly insignificant words. In *An “Objectivists” Anthology* (1932) Zukofsky included a section of collaborations, which consists of other people’s poems that he edited by deletion and rearrangement. Kenneth Rexroth was irritated enough at the treatment of his poem—whittling down “Prolegomena to a Theodicy” from 24 to 4 pages—to insist that Zukofsky add a disclaimer. In one direction, this can be seen as a more liberal extension of Zukofsky’s practice as editor of other’s poems, most famously and significantly in the case of William Carlos Williams, but other friends commonly received similar feedback. More importantly, this reworking of materials is paradigmatic of all Zukofsky’s major works, both poetry and criticism, since all his extended critical works (“Henry Adams,” *The Writings of Guillaume Apollinaire*, *A Test of Poetry*, *Bottom*) are constructed predominately from quotations. In this context it is worth noting that translation is the explicit reworking of a prior text so that questions of voice and authorship are inevitably ambiguous and thus generate endless debate. In this sense, the Zukofskys’ *Catullus* is doubly collaborative, and the effect of the Zukofskys’ method is not so much to sound like Catullus as to press back the individual voice of Catullus into the babel of voices inherent in the Latin text as heard by Americans. By placing unusual emphasis on the phonetic or voicing possibilities of the signifiers, there is a release of the multiple voices embedded in the texts. Following *Catullus*, translation becomes increasingly present throughout Zukofsky’s work, not merely in the obvious example of “A”-21’s rendition of Plautus, but in numerous examples of translation by homophonic suggestion that appear in virtually all movements of “A” from the mid-1960s on and become ubiquitous in “A”-23 and *80 Flowers*.

From this perspective, then, it seems appropriate that Zukofsky would allow the culmination of “A” to be turned over to Celia as a logical step wherein his own work speaks back to him as rearranged and read by another. Particularly since he had long insisted that this other reader was in any case always intimately present in his work. The familial emphasis so often observed in “A”, particularly after World War II, is not merely or predominately a thematic concern, but rather a figure for language as necessarily collaborative, since it is in the familial context that relationships are constructed within the medium of performed language with all its intimacy, nuances, shared meanings, idelects, which includes all the signifying practices and unexpressed meanings beyond language as narrowly defined. The poetic dialectic of linguistic intimacy that is simultaneously a recognition of the presence of others is literally performed in “A”-11—often taken as marking the decisive shift to a familial

center in Zukofsky's work—in which the poet addresses the poem itself to speak to his wife and son from whom the poem takes its impetus and in whom the poet/poem will continue to exist after the poet's death, itself the figure for any poem's fate on leaving the poet and engaging its readers.

What is most obvious about "A"-24 and why Zukofsky recognized it as an appropriate culmination of "A" is simply that it is an attempt at a comprehensive summation of his work. In the brief note or verse Zukofsky appended to the end of "A"-24, he points to Celia hearing his work as or in its recurrences, as that one continuous work that Zukofsky periodically asserted underlie not only "A" but all his writing. This of course is more a utopian horizon than an assertion, either formal or thematic, so that coherence is a matter of seeing and hearing similarities in variation. Celia's conception was to assemble the work based on conventional genres as establishing a range or gamut of voices following Louis' own insistence that there is no essential difference between these various modes since all his writing was an extension of poetry. In her brief instructional preface to "A"-24 (564), Celia makes two interesting points: 1) the movement as a whole is "centrally motivated" by the drama voice, that is, *Arise, Arise*; and 2) the four textual voices selected from Louis' works should maintain their distinctness and must not be sung to the music. This latter point indicates that the textual voices are not to be assimilated to, much less subordinated to the music, thus maintaining Louis' integral of speech and music as a democratic range within which poetry works rather than merely a trajectory implying the desire of all poetic language to transform itself into the musical.

Once posited, the idea of distributing the textual voices of "A"-24 according to conventional literary genres is reasonable enough. Also the choice of *Arise, Arise* as the primary formal template for "A"-24 seems obvious since it was Zukofsky's one performance text, although at the time Celia began working on the *L.Z. Masque* Louis was translating Plautus' *Rudens* for "A"-21. In a number of respects Zukofsky's 1930s play, which is concerned with the intersection of revolution and family, suggests elements of what became "A"-24. The play does not present characters who develop psychologically or even possess much individuality, rather it is a performance of voices and an early attempt to write a work that moves toward music and dance.<sup>3</sup> For "A"-24, *Arise, Arise* has been stripped apart into monologues which have then been synchronized with voices from elsewhere in Louis' writings, as well as with Händel's score, which foregrounds the textual interchange rather than the illusion of natural dialogue. This might be understood as implicit in *Arise, Arise* to begin with since, as so often in Zukofsky's writing, the play is heavily sedimented throughout with mostly submerged quotations. There are numerous sources for these quotations, but some sense of their range might be suggested by mentioning John Donne, Henry Adams, Marx, documents from the Dutch period of New York history, translations from Apollinaire and snippets from Zukofsky's own poetry. There is no sense that the quotations are merely ventriloquized through individual characters, and occasionally different characters supposedly in dialogue speak a continuous quotation. This in part explains the impression

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<sup>3</sup> In a letter to Isaku Hirai (18 May 1950), Zukofsky suggests the play tends toward dance and might be likened to Noh, but this characterization is no doubt affected by his addressee (HRC 5.15). More often he claimed the play needed to be performed by Chinese, reflecting the deep impression made on him by seeing a performance in 1930 by the great Chinese actor Mei Lanfang. All traditional Chinese drama is closer to what we would call opera (e.g. Peking Opera), structured around singing and deploying highly stylized acting. See 10 June 1936 letter to Pound and 15 Jan. 1959 letter to Cid Corman. For Zukofsky and Williams enthusiasm over seeing Mei Lanfang, see *WCW/LZ* 60-62. Mary Oppen's somewhat garbled account in *Meaning a Life* mentions that Zukofsky liked to do imitations of Mei (94).

that often the characters are not talking to each other. As the play moves toward its comedic conclusion (marriage, music and dance), ordinary or realistic dialogue largely evaporates and the communion achieved is at some other level. Zukofsky was working with a musical idea of drama—not only is the play punctuated by various musical settings but there is an attempt to orchestrate texts as dialogue that is affective as effect rather than argument. The revolution the play enacts is not so much a rearrangement acted by and among the characters but meant to be experienced by the audience as a release from personal conflicts into a sense of what the utopian might feel like. These sketchy remarks merely suggest how “A”-24 can be understood as extrapolated out of the implied logic of *Arise, Arise*, which stands as Louis’ earliest overtly performative work.

Although *Bottom: on Shakespeare* centers on a dramatist, Zukofsky appears little concerned with the performance of Shakespeare’s plays—if anything he is all too compulsively focused on the plays as fragmentable texts. Here I want to consider one of *Bottom*’s many eccentricities: the presentation of *Pericles* as Shakespeare’s culminating achievement. We might be inclined to understand this extravagant advocacy as no more than a gesture of solidarity with Celia’s musical setting of the play that became the second volume of *Bottom* (although conceived and completed separately from Louis’ project). However, Zukofsky’s argument for the play, not surprisingly, is that it was conceived in terms of musical structure. From Zukofsky’s perspective it is no drawback that *Pericles* lacks a plausible plot or that its cardboard characters hardly present psychological development, since he is consistently uninterested in the intricacies of plot, theme and especially character psychology that preoccupy most discussions of Shakespeare. He does not value verisimilitude, and in this respect we might note the obvious similarities in his choice of Plautus for “A”-21. What interests Zukofsky is the poetic texture of *Pericles*. The text as a performance in the act of reading has an affective impact on the reader/audience prior to or beyond the illusionary effect of the play as mimetic presentation. This is what he primarily means by his insistence in *Bottom* on a preference for eyes over mind: looking at and with rather than through the text. The musical horizon of *Pericles* is its manifest desire for what early on Zukofsky, echoing Spinoza, termed “perfection,” or we might prefer to say the utopian. The plot of *Pericles*, as Zukofsky sees it, is a series of false or failed attempts to realize this utopia until the final achievement which requires not merely the reunion with but the recognition of wife and daughter—the reconstitution of the family as necessarily the recognition of others. But while that reconstitution is acted out in the play, overtly as allegory, what really interests Zukofsky is how the play as verbal performance achieves this as an affect on the reader-audience, how the verbal and musical effects of the play work on the reader in its effort to achieve what the plot and characters only awkwardly mime. In other words, he reads *Pericles* as a model for the Zukofskian poem.

Stating that Celia’s musical setting of *Pericles*, which occupies the second volume of *Bottom*, is the “excuse” for his own examination of Shakespeare, Louis implies that her work is the demonstration of his more arduous argument. Her musical score is not a musical interpretation of the play but highlights and marks recurrences so as to bring out the musicality within the text. In *Bottom* Louis argues that Shakespeare is the body of texts so designated and that the theme of eyes that he so compulsively traces throughout that body and beyond is a defining recurrence that is Shakespeare. In the dialogue between I and Son that makes up the long section significantly entitled “Definition,” he admits that this particular recurrence may be merely projected by him as reader, but ultimately this is an undecidable epistemological quandary as to where the text of Shakespeare really exists. More importantly, Zukofsky argues for a defused intentionality that pulses through the body of texts called Shakespeare and that affects readers in various ways but is not locatable in a specific place or intention. “A”-24 presents a version of Zukofsky’s body of work as a

coherent whole determined not so much by a compulsive theme as by recurrence as points of possible similarity, variation and antithesis (counterpoint). This is a coherence possible not only within the total body of Zukofsky's work but also with an outside, in this case figured as the musical score as well as other readers.

By designating Celia's composition as also his own, Louis explicitly inscribes the reader into his work—or at least an ideal reader. If Celia's assemblage is comprehensive, it is as a possible reading of the interstices of Louis' work. That Zukofsky's poetics recognizes the reader's active participation in the production of the text is not new. In *Bottom*, Zukofsky speaks of the text reading the reader, and the entire compulsive concern with eyes and seeing is largely about the activity of looking and seeing that is reading: how one sees when eyeing letters and words. Or, how the text eyes and reads the reader. In this sense, "A"-24 presents a possible reading of Zukofsky's writings and does so in a way that foregrounds the activity of reading: not only the complex assemblage we might call Celia's reading, but the heightened self-consciousness of our own reading activity when reading Celia's reading. Another way to put this is that Celia's presentation is such that we can hardly be unconscious of the myriad decisions and indeterminacies in the reading or hearing process as we attempt to negotiate meaningful conjunctions of the textual selections presented. The entire question of how to read this movement or even whether it is meant to be read at all, as opposed to performed, confronts us quite explicitly.

This focus on the activity of reading points toward "A"-24 as a performative text: to that great aspiration of modernist texts to have an impact beyond the cocoon of reading as a subjective act. In the case of "A"-24, the performative involvement of others can be understood as the voices of others to realize it as performance, as well as the potential presence of others as audience or public readers for any such performance. A performance again highlights the relative position of any given participant within a larger complex where there can be no pretense of occupying a privileged position. As performance "A"-24 also foregrounds the extreme indeterminacy of the work, as recognitions and decisions are constantly being made within the awareness that other and different recognitions and decisions are always available. If "A"-24 enacts Zukofsky's collaborative poetics in the sense of reworking found texts and revealing latent possibilities perhaps not conscious to the original "author," it also does so in its open engagement of the reader/listener who necessarily rewrites the text "in so far as it is understood by their nature," as Spinoza puts it.

When Zukofsky recognized and designated Celia's masque as the final movement of "A", this solved one question about the conclusion of his life-poem, but raised another in that now he needed to fill out the two remaining movements as a bridge to "A"-24. If "A"-24 limits itself, in the first instance, to texts designated as by Zukofsky (aside, that is, from the musical score by Händel), then "A"-22 & 23 call upon potentially any text across historical and linguistic cultures, with numerous foreign languages incorporated in the form of homophonic translations. Yet all are unbounded texts in which the reader/listener finds themselves situated, compelled to hear or see recurrences across their surfaces, rather than fixing referential anchors. In the case of "A"-24 it is something like the body of Zukofsky's writings as a whole that is being sounded, although as mentioned those writings are so self-consciously full of quotation as to render any attempt to draw a bounding limit largely futile. "A"-22 & 23 can be thought of as language epics in which textual materials representing 6000 years of human culture have been stitched together using the full range of characteristic Zukofskian techniques, including quotation, paraphrase, severe pruning, grafting, homophonic transmutation. However, the end result in both "A"-24 and "A"-22 & 23 is that we confront works in which the reader/performer/audience always finds themselves situated within a thoroughly overdetermined textual context with constantly shifting recognitions of

recurrences of one sort or another. Since writing is rewriting, therefore writing-reading is always an embedded sounding of textual possibilities, as an effort to maximize recurrences.

The point of which, from Zukofsky's perspective, is an ever heightened tuning into the full weight of the linguistic body, albeit necessarily cut across and limited by constant dissonance to a greater or lesser degree. All this linguistic weight is imbued or motivated by utopian desire, a Spinozian aspiration to realize a maximization of being, activity, perfection, which ultimately can only be realized relative to the realization of the whole that is others. Zukofsky's preferred term or figure for the utopian was music, although there are various analogous terms in his work, such as silence or bliss. What Louis appreciated in Celia's gift was not merely that she read a coherence in perceived recurrences across his works, which would have been a pre-determined assumption in any case, but the active readerly performance of such a reading, which manifests her own bliss within and among his texts. Anyone who has experienced a performance of "A"-24 might sometimes wonder about their own sense of bliss, but the demonstration is there to suggest any number of alternative possibilities based on any given reader's nature.

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