

In a 1957 letter to William Carlos Williams, Zukofsky objected to the characterization of “A”-8 as “an epic of the class-struggle,”—“epic” was ok but “class struggle” was not (WCW/LZ 541).¹ This remark must be qualified in that it was made two decades after the poem’s composition and self-consciously in the context of the heated anti-Communism of the Cold War, but if we understand Zukofsky’s objection to “class struggle” as indicating his wariness of a certain type of Leftist discourse, then it remains an accurate summation of Zukofsky’s original position.² “A”-8 can aptly be designated epic poetry, if we understand that to mean a long poem including history and offering a vision of national destiny, and to a considerable extent the movement’s argument is framed by its numerous Marxist quotations. Yet if the movement’s allegiance is clearly Marxist, even Leninist, its formal presentation is an effort to set into dialogue a broad range of discourses and in this sense attempts to realize the possibilities of collage or the “sportsmanship” of montage (*Prep+* 60-61). When he explained the intent of “A”-8, Zukofsky characteristically evoked the model of Bach’s polyphonic music where themes or groups of materials are played off each other to create a complex structure of analogous overlap and differences from which ideally no thread can be isolated without destroying the larger intent of the whole.³ This is not to say that Zukofsky

¹ This characterization of “A” appears in the Contributors Notes of *New Directions 1938*, where “A”-8 was first published. Presumably the editor, James Laughlin, was responsible for this write up since Zukofsky tells Williams that at the time he wrote Laughlin in protest. Laughlin, many years later, attributes the phrase to Zukofsky, but it is evident that his memory is less than reliable, which he covers by admitting his autobiographical notes are part fiction, as his title indicates: *The Way it Wasn’t: From the Files of James Laughlin* (2006): 336.

² This letter, dated Thanksgiving 1957, was never sent and is included by Ahearn in an appendix to his edition of the Williams-Zukofsky correspondence (541-542). Williams had written a preface for “A” 1-12, which Zukofsky was preparing for book publication (this volume with Williams’ preface as a “note” was published by Cid Corman’s Origin Press in 1959, but at the time Zukofsky was working with a different potential publisher). Zukofsky’s unsent letter was intended to warn Williams that “A” might be accused of communist sympathies and that Williams might risk being tarred by association. Zukofsky was aware of the insinuations of communist sympathies Williams suffered in the early 1950s that ultimately scuttled his appointment as Consultant to the Library of Congress. In the previous month Zukofsky had revised “A”-8, and as Scroggins has shown, some of these revisions tone down by deleting some of what might be taken as Party rhetoric (*Louis Zukofsky and the Poetry of Knowledge* (1998): 155-159). Nevertheless, the overall revision of the movement is not extensive nor systematic and no effort has been made to downplay the prominent presence of Marx and Lenin, much less to reconceive the movement. In other words, the revised “A”-8 gives an accurate view of Zukofsky’s original intentions. For a list of revisions, see the Textual Notes on the Z-site.

³ See 9 Nov. 1935 letter to Lorine Niedecker (quoted in Barry Ahearn, *Zukofsky’s “A”: An Introduction* (1983): 75-76). This letter included and commented on the opening pages of “A”-8, which was still at a relatively early stage in its composition; however, some have understood these eight fugally interrelated themes to structure the entire movement, although so far no one has convincingly shown how this is the case. On the much discussed question of fugal form in “A”, see my commentary on “A”-12.

attempts to give all sides an equal voice, so to speak, but that a spectrum of relevant discourses creates a sufficiently complex, even ambiguous texture that the tendentious propensities of any given discourse are off-set. One might consider Zukofsky's heavy deployment of Marxist texts in the works of this period as an effort to translate them out of the doctrinaire rigidity to which they were being routinely submitted. There is no doubt that Zukofsky took Marx's critique of capitalism to be authoritative, nor that he believed Lenin to be a momentous man of history, both crucial in the effort to come to terms with and effectively respond to the demands of the present. However, in "A"-8 and in a different manner in the first half of "A"-9 as well, Zukofsky sets various quotations from Marx and Marxists (Engels, Lenin and Stalin) alongside others, not as a critical vantage vis-à-vis the latter but to mix it up and create webs or polyphonic patterns, which in part function to bleed off some of the argumentative force of the quotations. If "A"-8's concerns are predominantly historical, they are also historicist, and thus aware of the evidence as historically contingent and symptomatic of its specific circumstances. An alternative way to articulate this is to point out that for Zukofsky texts by definition are never one-dimensional but are infinitely sedimented and full of ghosts. All texts embody vast accumulations of cultural labor and in that sense infinitely overlap and interpenetrate, and this is the perspective on writing-reading that interests Zukofsky.

The materials collaged into "A"-8 are diverse, but it is historical materials, particularly from Marxist and American history sources, that predominate and form the larger skeleton of the movement. In broad outline, these two major strands of materials draw parallels between the revolutionary origins and contemporary situations of the Soviet experiment and Depression era America. The view that the U.S. began in revolution but in the course of the 19th century lost sight of its ideals and promise, now in need of radical revival, was common enough during this period of the Popular Front, as was the interest in Americanized adaptations of Communism, and this hardly in itself distinguishes the poem. However, Poundian style interpretations of history are not what mainly interest Zukofsky, but rather the setting into play of discourses that represent the attempt to articulate and pragmatically respond to current exigencies. The opening invocation announces the theme of labor, the dialectical interchange between matter and mind, conceived of as the process of self-realization, whether on the individual or socio-historical levels. The early reappearance of Bach evokes the fugal form of presentation, but here given a new emphasis on the struggle of the artist to materially realize his work in the face of social constraints and misunderstanding.

Discussions of "A"-8 tend to treat the movement as a grabbag of quotations as if the collage method is little more than an egalitarian laying out of a large collection of diverse materials, rather than the deliberately constructive method Zukofsky insists on in "*Modern Times*." Unlike most modernist long poems, Zukofsky suppresses any section markers no matter how long a given movement, so "A"-8's 60 plus pages forces the reader to inductively struggle toward a recognition of larger structures through repeated immersion. The following outlines a seven-part structure to the movement:

- 1) An opening epic invocation announcing the primary theme, which is to be pursued in a dialectical manner: "Labor as creator, / Labor as creature" (43).
- 2) An introductory section on Bach, emphasizing the mundane practical and economic problems of realizing a performance of *St. Matthew Passion* (43-45).
- 3) A cluster of quotations from Marx and Engels introduces a long segment in which Marxist materials form the main skeleton, neatly marked off at the beginning and the end by the key Marx quotation—"that work becomes the basis for more than mere means of living." This section also includes a few key vignettes of the Soviet Union (45-70).

- 4) At this point another long segment is introduced concentrating on American history, primarily through quotations from the Adams brothers, which is plotted on an irregular but strictly chronological sequence of dates from 1648 to 1901. Marx quotations continue to appear, but mostly intersecting with the American history materials: e.g. Marx's observations on the American Civil War or his remarks about a Worker's Conference in Baltimore, but also his approval of the pragmatism of the Anglo-Americans as opposed to the more theoretically oriented but ineffective Continentals (70-82).
- 5) Another long segment depicts the present situation, 1935-1937, especially Depression era America, but also taking a more global look and culminating with vignettes of the Spanish Civil War (83-100).
- 6) A three-page segment focusing on Thomas Jefferson but implying parallels with Marx and Lenin, which functions as something of a concluding summary of the preceding long historical segments (100-103).
- 7) A brief transition and then the concluding ballade conceived of as an overlapping fugal structure that blends various bits from what has preceded and anticipates "A"-9 (103-105).

Laid out in this manner, the broad argument of "A"-8 is reasonably clear: a link is drawn between the American and Russian Revolutions, but whereas the chronological presentation of American history materials traces a drift away from the initial impetus and promises of their revolution, the Russian Revolution offers a contemporary example of a renewed impetus and hope that needs to be translated into the current American situation. As Burton Hatlen has pointed out, this switch is somewhat obliquely foreshadowed fairly early in the movement with the line, "Marx waiting, time to go, said Adams" (51), which is quoted straight out of *The Education of Henry Adams* and is followed by a few more lines of paraphrase from the gloomy concluding paragraph of that work.⁴ In what I have designated the American history segment, the primary materials come from various works by the Henry, Brooks and Charles Francis Adams, tracing the frustrated efforts of their grandfather John Quincy Adams, the rackets of the robber barons and culminating in extensive quotations from the chapter of *The Education* describing Henry's trip to Russia in 1901. For Henry Adams, Russia is emblematic of historical inertia, although he counter-intuitively senses some inklings of cataclysmic historical change there—"Very likely, Russia, would instantly become—" (82), at which point Zukofsky leaves the quotation hanging and modulates into a depiction of Depression era America.⁵ Zukofsky was no doubt intrigued that *The Education* was posthumously published in 1918, contemporaneous with the Bolshevik Revolution, creating an entirely different historical perspective to reevaluate that of Adams, who the latter himself asserts with numbing regularity is stuck in the 18th century. When his long essay on Henry Adams was serially published in *Hound and Horn*, Zukofsky added a lengthy footnote in which he speculates on Adams' reaction to the Russian Revolution, claiming that he would not have been surprised, given his own historical predictions about both Russia and socialism in *The Education* and "The Tendency of History," and insisting that as a historian Adams should not be seen as merely a reactionary symptom of his class as standard Marxist

⁴ Hatlen, Burton, "Art And/As Labor: Some Dialectical Patterns in "A"-1 through "A"-10. *Contemporary Literature* 25.2 (Summer 1984): 225.

⁵ Adams' sentence continues: "Very likely, Russia would instantly become the most brilliant constellation of human progress through all the ordered stages of good; but meanwhile one might give a value as movement of inertia to the mass, and assume a slow acceleration that would, at the end of a generation, leave the gap between east and west relatively the same." *The Education of Henry Adams* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1918): 410.

commentators assumed.⁶ However Marxist Zukofsky's sympathies, we should not forget that his understanding of history is everywhere informed by the example of Henry Adams, as curious as it may seem that the son of working class Russian Jewish immigrants was so attracted to the xenophobic patrician descendent of two presidents. Adams was a historian who could not finally convince himself that it was possible to make sense of history, as if we are always inevitably lagging behind history itself. Whether directly influenced by his reading of or simply finding in Adams a sympathetic confirmation, from early on Zukofsky was deeply skeptical of broad historical explanations, the imposition of abstract patterns and rationalizations on the welter of lived particulars. Consequently, he was skeptical of "dialectical materialism" as a teleological reading of history. He recognized historical discourse as precisely that, linguistic articulations that attempt to negotiate current needs.

At the point Adams' trip to Russia breaks off, "A"-8 switches to the description of a Russian Jewish immigrant landing in the U.S. (83). This in fact is Zukofsky's father, Pinchos, with the very young Zukofsky himself putting in a cameo appearance a few lines further hitting his elder brother over the head with a shoe, so the new blood represented by Zukofsky takes over from the paralysis of action represented by the Adamases as heirs of a more paternalistic revolutionary tradition. However, Zukofsky does not present the Adamases as representing a failed tradition or understanding of history, to be corrected in light of the higher truth of Marxism, but rather that underlying assumptions between the two are in fact compatible. The series of quotations from the Adamases in "A"-8 begin abruptly with the phrase "Constructive centralization" (71), which is obviously intended to resonate with good socialist principles. This phrase taken from Brooks Adams' lengthy introductory essay to *The Degradation of the Democratic Dogma* (1919), which collected Henry's late efforts to apply scientific theory to history, refers to an idea that originated with George Washington and was pursued by John Quincy Adams to construct a national infrastructure system to promote the economic and communicative coherence of the nation, rather than leaving such matters to local and private interests with the inevitable exploitative consequences. Zukofsky selects from Brooks' lengthy account of John Quincy Adams' efforts to initiate various forward-looking projects in the national interest, including his keen interest in observatories, which were systematically frustrated by his political successors, particularly Andrew Jackson, for the benefit of private interests. This could be pursued in considerable detail, but Zukofsky point is to draw various connections that allow for the possibility to imagine a translation between American and Marxist-Soviet revolutionary traditions based on analogous assumptions about state responsibility to protect against business predations.

On the other side of the matter, the first long Marxist section begins with a quotation from Marx via Lenin's *State and Revolution* concerned with differentiating between equal rights and actual individual differences (45). Marx unmasks the claims for equal rights in capitalist society as not in practice social equality but its antithesis, the protection of the individual's right to take advantage of others, an abstract conception of equality imposed on and repressing the fact of differences. The specific context out of which Zukofsky has extracted this quotation is Lenin's classic discussion of the transition from capitalism to socialism to fully achieved communism: because the stage of socialism necessarily arises from the shell of capitalism it will retain the residual elements of the labor theory of value so

⁶ "Henry Adams: A Criticism in Autobiography—Part III," *Hound & Horn* 4.1 (Oct.-Dec. 1930): 69-70. This note was partially incorporated into the final version of "Henry Adams" (*Prep+* 124-125), but not surprisingly his specific remarks on Marx and the Russian Revolution disappeared. I assume Zukofsky added this note in revising his M.A. thesis for publication in *Hound & Horn*, although it may be in the thesis, which I have not been able to consult.

that each will be rewarded according to their labor, whereas in the higher stage of communism, “From each according to his ability; to each according to his needs” (the latter phrase quoted at 52). In other words, once the social condition has been realized where labor is more than mere subsistence (46), then there will be a common recognition that social wealth should be distributed unevenly according to different individual needs. Although Zukofsky truncates this larger argument, the early foregrounding of the conception of “equal rights” seems obviously enough addressed to a specifically American audience and immediately confronts their most common paranoia about socialism: the submersion of the individual in the name of socialist sameness. As Zukofsky will suggest in the later American sections, questions of economic (in)justice, as well as tolerance toward other groups, which implies the protection of the socially weaker from exploitation, were at the heart of America’s early conceptions of itself and the basis of its revolution. In this manner, Zukofsky attempts not so much to simply claim Marxist and American traditions are analogous, but to present their discourses as overlaying each other, forming a dialogue in which they augment and critique each other, and ultimately implying a common basis in or assumptions about human endeavor and self-realization that motivates the specific articulations in their social contexts, as well as a measure of their continued relevance and effectiveness.

The most striking contrast between these two discourses is in the complementary depictions of the present: the successes of the Soviet economic plans in contrast to Depression era America, but here too matters are not as simplistic as they may initially appear. The Soviet experiment is depicted in overtly utopian terms through a few vignettes, in which a shopkeeper happily makes the belated discovery he no longer owns “their” shop (59-60) and the rather curious emphasis given to the altitude record set by the *Stratostat*, a stratospheric balloon (68-69). These no doubt strike us as naïve, but I suspect this is deliberate, which is marked by the presence of children in each: the reaction to the *Stratostat* is largely mediated through the perception of a young child, while the shopkeeper is informed about the socialization of his shop by his grown up son who we are told grew up in the second five-year plan (59). Actually the second five-year plan (1932-1937) was still ongoing when Zukofsky wrote this, so he seems to be projecting into the future. The role of children here contrasts sharply with the tragic vignettes involving children at the end of “A”-10, but the point is that for Zukofsky it is precisely the crushing of children’s dreams and lives that is the quintessential mark of social failure and brutality, while it is the effort to realize those dreams that must be the underlying impetus for any social redemption. These sketches are meant to represent hopeful possibilities rather than achieved realities, and therefore function to contrast with the despairing socialscape of contemporary America. The Depression is also depicted via anecdotal vignettes, primarily through a certain “Bob,” who is Zukofsky’s friend Robert Allison Evans, although mentions of strikes and intolerable working conditions are scattered throughout the movement.⁷

Many of the strands that criss-cross the Marxist and American segments are encapsulated in the short Thomas Jefferson section near the end of “A”-8 and immediately preceding the concluding ballade. This section consists of a cluster of five quotations from Thomas Jefferson interspersed with a few others concerned with science and finishing off with a final quotation, in which Marx tellingly insists that *Capital* is understandable to

⁷ Robert Allison Evans (ca. 1885-1943) was a mining engineer and executive who was fired when he protested against company policies (*WCW/LZ* 226; see also 18 Jan. 1936 letter to Pound, *SL* 130), and so would have represented for Zukofsky a privileged witness to the facts of working conditions and capitalist operations. Evans also wrote poetry and fiction based on his mining experiences, and Zukofsky’s efforts to promote him resulted in the publication of a two-page spread of poems in *New Masses* (4 Feb. 1936). See the poem “R.A.E.” (*CSP* 120).

workers and business people (103)—a view not often accepted by official Communist organs, but perhaps suggesting Zukofsky's hopes for his own work. Although mentioned, Jefferson is not given much prominence in the movement until the end, which is surprising given that Zukofsky worked on a Jefferson project while at the University of Wisconsin in 1930-1931 with Pound's encouragement.⁸ In "A"-8 Zukofsky uses the figure of Jefferson to draw parallels between the American and Russian Revolutions, but in such a way as to raise some interesting reflections on how we ought to read the Marxist and particularly Leninist passages that have proceeded.

The two longest Jefferson quotations (quotations 2 and 4 of the five) concern respectively a legal suit Jefferson argued on behalf of the U.S. government against the appropriation of land along the Mississippi river for private, commercial purposes and a description of preparations leading up to but preceding the American Revolution. The former obviously enough emphasizes the public good over private interests, while the latter draws specific parallels with Lenin as Jefferson looks to historical legal precedents to justify American resistance and mentions the spontaneous effect of their efforts in raising revolutionary consciousness. Zukofsky interpolates into the latter passage a parenthetical line referring to "Bloody Sunday in St. Petersburg (102), alluding to the failed 1905 Revolution in Russia, which is mentioned much earlier in the movement via quotations from Lenin's own reflections on the lessons to be learned from that uprising (53), including remarks on the spontaneous effect those events had in creating a sense of revolutionary consciousness and solidarity. Jefferson's remark that their efforts had an effect like an electrical shock (102) leads into a quotation from Cadwallader Colden, colonial governor and scientist who exchanged ideas with Benjamin Franklin, speculating on the nature of electricity, which serves as a reminder that the age of the American Revolution was also that of the beginning of modern science, whose manifestations have been worked in throughout "A"-8. As elsewhere, Zukofsky is interested in science as a discourse of rigorous, rational and this worldly analysis that offers models of knowledge to be constantly tested by the facts, as Zukofsky makes explicit in the next quotation, partially from Henri Poincaré, concerning the relationship between facts and language (102). Above all Zukofsky is suggesting a discursive and mental milieu out of which the American Revolution was articulated and by implication to which Marx and the Russian Revolution are more recent continuations in their own specific contexts.

In many respects, even more interesting are the three other Jefferson quotations which frame the two larger ones. All three are more personal, intimate and familial—two coming from letters to family members and the other from the introductory note to his *Autobiography* in which he claims he is primarily putting down this account for his family (101). Again, parallels are implied with Marx who Zukofsky presents in more personal terms, including a substantial quotation from a letter to his daughter Jenny on family life (93), in marked contrast to his presentations of Lenin and Stalin. Again, as in *Arise, Arise*, we find that this emphasis on the familial and the personal long predates Zukofsky's often noted focus on the domestic in his post-World War II work, and that in some sense the familial is bound up with the revolutionary. I would suggest that in "A"-8 this familial concern is intended to counterbalance the purely practical and analytic focus on social transformation, as represented by Lenin. It is as if the problem of revolution might be posed as one of how to realize radical social transformation while preserving and hopefully augmenting that fundamental sense of human bonds, intimacy and security, for which family is the prototypical experience or realization for most of us. One of the more compelling charges made by Marx and Engels against capitalism was its assault on the family and the reduction

⁸ An outline of a later version of this project is reproduced in the appendix to *SL* 332-333.

of familial bonds to relations of economic exploitation. The familial motif functions both to deflect the questions of revolution and socialism away from specific social programs or designs to underlying demands for human self-realization, and to counter the more tendentious rhetorical tendencies that result from the forgetting or repressing of these demands. Although it is difficult to judge just how far one should take this, the more personalized presentation of Marx as opposed the strictly pragmatic Lenin seems to suggest some qualification of the latter. The final quotations from Lenin, covering a page and a half (90-92), are taken from a series of interviews with Clara Zetkin, which offer a more rhetorically colorful Lenin, yet express a consistently severe attitude toward any personal concerns that detract from the urgent revolutionary work at hand. The most significant quotation from Stalin included in "A"-8 (66-67) goes still further than anything from Lenin in justifying violence against inner-Party opponents in the name of the revolution, and it is by no means clear whether we are or are not meant to read this. There is no doubt that Zukofsky like so many others at the time, including non-Marxists such as Pound, greatly admired Lenin's rigorous pragmatism and Zukofsky defended Stalin at the time on similar grounds, yet the appearance of Marx's letter to his daughter one page later suggests the limitations of such a stance if hardened into dogma, which unquestionably was a propensity among Lenin's many epigones. Zukofsky rarely had good words for the various American communists with whom he rubbed shoulders in these years. However, it has to be said that given "A"-8's historical concerns and public address, the larger arguments of pragmatism tend to overwhelm the nuances of subjective justice and self-fulfillment.

The main passage in "A"-8 where Stalin makes an appearance is difficult to read tonally. While there seem grounds for reading it ironically, one difficulty is that the nature of "A"-8's presentation renders irony ineffective and in general irony is not a major tool in Zukofsky's workbox. The passage in question begins by referring to Stalin as "The first brains of this party" (66), which immediately follows a reference to the title of Hieronymous Bosch's painting, "Garden of Terrestrial Lust." Zukofsky then paraphrases Stalin's remarks that originally read, "[Critics from within the Party] forgot that the more the enemies rage and the more hysterical the foes within the Party become, the more red-hot the Bolsheviks become for fresh struggles and the more vigorously they push forward" ("Address to the Graduates of the Red Army Academy" in Burns 959) as "Pitting / Greater passion against relentless fury". The latter articulation seems to me to cancel out both sides of the struggle—neither representing the sort of pragmatic, scientific viewpoint that generally characterizes Zukofsky's presentation of Marx or for that matter Lenin. Zukofsky curiously interpolates artists, specifically painters, into Stalin's quotation and then rephrases the remark from Marx that I have identified as the key motif of the Marxist segments in "A"-8: "So that the brush will not be a mere / means of feeding brains" (Marx: "When labor will have ceased to be a mere means of supporting life"). Is this a mere rearticulation of Marx's original or a twisted perversion? It is in fact very unusual for Zukofsky to tamper with quotations in this manner in "A"-8, whereas usually he merely edits through deletion but otherwise does not reword. In this context one might consider some remarks in a 11 July 1936 letter to Pound, in which Zukofsky explicitly discusses some of the key Marxist passages he was incorporating into "A"-8, and acidly mentions as samples of the "practical day to day working out of ethics under dictatorship of the proletariat" a couple of reports of people being "liquidated" in the Soviet Union (*EP/LZ* 184). However, a couple months later (9 Sept. 1936), responding to Pound's prompting, Zukofsky gives a detailed reaction to the incomplete reports of the first Moscow show trials giving what one imagines was a fairly common defense of Stalin in the context of the Popular Front period on pragmatic grounds (*SL* 152-158). So far, no clear statement has been uncovered of just when and why Zukofsky became disillusioned with Stalin and the Soviet Union, but "A"-10 seems to suggest that it was the Hitler-Stalin pact of

1939 (see commentary on “A”-10), and “A”-12 has a substantial passage that is clearly (by Zukofskian standards) critical of Stalin but maintaining hopes for communist revolution in the figure of Mao Zedong.⁹

Although I have been discussing “A”-8 in terms of what might be labeled its epic argument—its deployment of historical materials in something like a narrative manner—this is clearly a limited account of “A”-8’s formal presentation and does not sufficiently account for Zukofsky’s use of collage. Supposedly running throughout the movement is the theme of labor announced in the epic invocation (43). Both Hatlen and Tim Woods have recognized that by labor Zukofsky means human activity in general, the dialectic of social reproduction in all its manifestations, which as such justifies including anything in the collage.¹⁰ Zukofsky’s translation of Spinoza’s “Nature as creator, Nature as created,” active and passive modes of the totality, into terms of labor indicates this ubiquitous conception, as well as being an example of conflated discourses. However, labor as implying a basis in physical work, as would be the primary assumption on the Left at the time, is surprisingly intermittent in “A”-8, not least in the numerous quotations from the oracles of Marxism itself. A common argument made about Zukofsky’s work of this period is that his evocation of Marx’s labor theory asserts the recognition that poetic or aesthetic endeavor is labor as well, even that the foregrounding of the poetry’s strenuous formalism is an insistence on the hard work involved on the part of both the poet and the reader. While there is some truth in this, we ought to be wary of too easy an erasure of the division of labor, which Zukofsky recognizes as defining the yet to be realized non-exploitative society (45-46). The first few pages of “A”-8 return to the well established topic of Bach’s *St. Matthew Passion*, but whereas in “A”-1 it is the effect of the performance that is foregrounded, here Zukofsky emphasizes the practical and material challenges in realizing its performance—inadequate resources, lack of support, insufficient wages and uncomprehending audience. It is notable, however, that here and elsewhere Zukofsky avoids typical Marxist class critique that would judge aesthetic works on the basis of their apologetics for or criticism of the status quo.

“A”-8 is not primarily concerned with representing labor in the usual sense, but in activating a perception of labor as embodied particularly in language, and the collage method is deployed to evoke the interpenetration and overlapping of superficially discrete discourses, to see them as efforts to account for existence and to realize human aspirations. The poetry must enact the theme of labor through the activation of the perception of labor, the recognition of the accumulation of labor embodied everywhere around us: “in air / On streets, on earth, in earth” (43). Thus labor is “light” in the sense that it reveals through its very

⁹ However, in a 20 June 1941 letter to Rexroth, Zukofsky is still willing to approve of Stalin, apparently given the alternatives in the context of the war (*SL* 188). Robert Duncan, recalling the spectrum of dismal political allegiances of his modernist elders when he first encountered them in the late 1930s, called Zukofsky a Stalinist—a designation Burton Hatlen felt compelled to refute. While Hatlen has a point that Zukofsky never identified himself with the specific positions of the CP, he is really talking past Duncan, whose west coast, anarchist oriented perspective was suspicious of any alignment with official Soviet policy. The difficulty in all this is the range of implications meant by “Stalin” or “Stalinism,” which could designate the specific actions and policies of a political leader, the mainstream faction within the larger communist movement as opposed to, say, Trotsky, or the general head of the world-wide socialist movement in contrast to fascism and capitalism. See Robert Duncan, “As Testimony: Reading Zukofsky These Forty Years,” *Paideuma* 7.3 (Winter 1978): 421-427; Burton Hatlen, “Stalin and/or Zukofsky: A Note,” *Paideuma* 8.1 (1979): 149-151.

¹⁰ Hatlen 220-221; Tim Woods, *The Poetics of the Limit: Ethics and Politics in Modern and Contemporary American Poetry* (2002): 75-76.

process the realization of the mutual potential in both active and passive nature, mind and matter, and in turn brings to consciousness this embodied inheritance, which renders conceptions of private ownership untenable. This realization, which is itself embedded in the activity of labor, tends to replicate itself via association, whether association is understood as working with others or the recognition of the social relations among things.

Zukofsky scrupulously avoids the term “dialectics,” preferring “process,” which is defined in two key passages of “A”-8: the first quoting *Capital* on “The Labor Process and the Process of Surplus Value” and the other from Thorstein Veblen’s essay on “The Evolution of the Scientific Point of View.”¹¹ In the former, Zukofsky quotes a strongly Hegelian passage describing the labor process as the idea realizing itself in material, which dialectically involves the worker surrendering his will to the process in order to realize his purpose (61).¹² As already indicated, this fundamental model runs throughout Zukofsky’s poetics and conception of the writer, and there is no reason to assume that Marx is the sole or necessarily the primary source for this view. What is significant in Marx, however, is the insistence on a materialistic siting of this process, which remains throughout Zukofsky’s entire work: an insistence on the materialistic, indeed physiological basis of the aesthetic. Zukofsky concludes his quotations on the labor process with one of Marx’s literary flourishes, suggesting that through labor the worker rouses things from their sleep so that things simultaneously consume and are consumed by labor, animating both (62). It requires very little translating to see this as an apt model for the act of writing-reading, especially with its dialectical play on “consumed” whereby desire and its satisfaction fold into each other. Equally, this describes the compositional-reading process of “A”-8 itself, so that labor as a dialectical process becomes the thread that ties all together, as indeed Marxism as a discourse is characterized by the demand to see everything as ultimately related—an imperative that has inevitably given rise to the unfortunate temptation to reductiveness, e.g. everything immediately translated into economic or class terms.¹³ While on the one hand the collage of

¹¹ There are at least two instances where Zukofsky’s quotations from Marx and Lenin edit out the term “dialectics” or its variants. A quotation from a Marx letter to Engels (31 July 1865) is partially carved out of the following sentence: “This is impossible with **Jacob Grimm’s method**, which is in general **more suited to works not dialectically constructed**” (Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Selected Correspondence 1846-1895*, Trans. Dona Torr (1942): 204; see “A” 58. A few lines further, Zukofsky quotes from a section of an article on Marx by Lenin specifically explaining Marxist dialectics: “This revolutionary side of Hegel’s philosophy was adopted and developed by Marx. Dialectical materialism **‘does not need any philosophy towering above the other sciences’** [*Anti-Düring*]. Of former philosophies there remain ‘the science of thinking and its laws—formal logic and dialectics’ [*Ibid.*]. Dialectics, as the term is used by Marx in conformity with Hegel, includes what is now called the theory of cognition, or epistemology, or gnoseology, a science that must contemplate its subject matter in the same way—historically, studying and generalizing the origin and development of cognition, the transition from *non-consciousness* to consciousness” (“Teachings of Karl Marx” in Emile Burns, ed., *A Handbook of Marxism* (1935): 542; see “A” 58). From the continuation of this same passage, Zukofsky quotes some of Marx and Lenin’s characterizations of dialectics: “‘intervals of gradualness’” and “‘quantity into quality.’”

¹² This passage on the labor process from “A”-8 was published in *New Masses* (27 July 1937), but apparently without Zukofsky’s permission and to his annoyance (see letter to James Laughlin, 4 Nov. 1937 in *SL* 172-174).

¹³ Via Lenin, Zukofsky refers to such economic reductiveness at 91, although admittedly his presentation is somewhat oblique and assumes we catch Lenin’s irony. The original passage, from Clara Zetkin’s *Reminiscences of Lenin* (1924; English translation 1929), reads: “‘But

“A”-8 can be taken as a typical modernist effort to represent or account for the contemporary in its dynamic complexity, suggesting and implying the relation of any particular to any and all other particulars, Zukofsky is perhaps even more concerned with the effect and perception of these particulars as fragments of discourses which need to be seen not only as interrelated but as diverse efforts to grasp and negotiate the world. As Zukofsky interposes at one point, we need to be constantly asking, “who says it, what said, to whom?” (73). In the Spinozian terms that much attracted Zukofsky, any given articulation is never simply in error, but a matter of being more or less limited, less than the totality of God-Nature, which might remind us of certain contemporary theories of ideology.

A significant forerunner of such conceptions of ideology was Veblen, particularly the essay “The Evolution of the Scientific Point of View,” which is the source of the second key passage on process (56-57) and an essay of particular importance to Zukofsky at the time.¹⁴ As the title suggests, the essay is a historicist account of science as a paradigm of knowledge or world view stretching back to the most primordial and primitive thought processes. Veblen makes two key points that Zukofsky draws out in “A”-8. First, he contextualizes and relativizes scientific knowledge (56) so as to debunk the perception that science is the teleological endpoint of the development of knowledge. Secondly, Veblen detects the residual elements of primitive or irrational thinking immanent within scientific view, which he labels as “animistic” or “anthropomorphic.” This latter point appears in Zukofsky’s quotation in terms of the “metaphysical” nature of “concomitance of variation” (56), which essentially means cause and effect—science everywhere assumes such a connection, although it cannot be observed or proven, only that this follows that with statistical regularity. So although “its notation” (57), mathematics or other scientific discourse, appears the furthest remove from anthropomorphism, this underlying but unprovable assumption remains at its basis. Modern thought as exemplified by science finds itself confronted with the question of process, of change and transformation, not only in the object but in the socio-historical framework of knowledge itself, a phenomena that always eludes the explanatory and notational powers of science itself.

The language of science is arguably as important a thematic thread as any other throughout “A”-8, and with his friend Jerry Reisman, Zukofsky seems to have read a fair amount on modern science around 1930, especially on the remarkable developments in physics from Einstein through quantum mechanics. On the one hand, there is in Veblen’s sense the general world view projected by science to which Zukofsky was strongly inclined and that would include Henry Adams and Marx: a rigorously this-worldly and materialistic knowledge that arises from a direct engagement with and testing of the immediate world.¹⁵ In

thanks for such Marxism which directly and immediately attributes all phenomena and changes in the ideological superstructure of society to its economic basis. Matters aren’t quite so simple as that. A certain Frederick Engels pointed that out a long time ago with regard to historical materialism” (58).

¹⁴ Veblen’s essay was collected in *The Place of Science in Modern Civilization and Other Essays* (1919). Zukofsky mentions the significance of this essay in “‘Recencies’ in Poetry” (*Prep* + 210), originally published as the preface to *An “Objectivists” Anthology*, and also quotes from the same essay in “A”-12 (257).

¹⁵ The argument of Brook Adams’ long introductory essay, “The Heritage of Henry Adams,” from which Zukofsky quotes so extensively in “A”-8, is that John Quincy Adams had a pragmatic and scientific outlook put into the service of a comprehensive national rather than private vision. The point is that Henry Adams inherited this outlook, which explains his late efforts to directly apply scientific theories to history in the essays gathered into *The Degradation of the Democratic Dogma*.

“A”-8, Zukofsky stresses, often via Marx, that this orientation is particularly characteristic of the Anglo-American outlook. On the other hand, Zukofsky was fascinated by science as a mode of knowledge that vastly expands or redefines the facts or particulars that need to be accounted for, whereas formerly these “facts” simply did not exist or were not considered significant. In this sense science literally gives us new eyes (see mention of eating radiation (63-64) or highspeed photos of a drop (92)). More important is the idea of science as a “notation,” an effort to articulate what cannot be seen or counted except as mediated by mathematics, the evidence of scientific instruments or other highly abstract expressions. In this sense science is overtly a matter of articulations or models that more or less work, which is high-lighted by quantum physics finding that both wave and particle models appear to equally explain the evidence, despite seeming to be incompatible models (49). Science highlights the demand for increasingly complex linguistic models to do justice to modern knowledge, while at the same time dramatically raising the problem of abstraction, of the rapidly increasing distance between language or thought and the particularities of existence that must necessarily underwrite these abstractions.

In apparent antithesis or complement to the passages of science, abstractions driven by the effort to account for the welter of material and historical particulars, are passages that I designate as subjective or impressionistic. Although they appear scattered throughout the movement, these passages have received little comment, but Niedecker did query Zukofsky about a puzzling six-line passage beginning, “Peter’s garden” (64), interpolated into a lengthy description on the production of a type of Swiss cheese. Zukofsky responded that this was “orchestration,” essentially a tone poem modulating sound qualities (qtd. Ahearn 74-75). The significance of such passages within the larger context of “A”-8 is as a reminder of the irreducibility of particulars, the immediate empirical and sensual contact that is both the foundation for as well as ever-eluding our efforts to articulate it, whether these particulars are understood as subjective sensation and experience or as seemingly random words and phrases. It is as if the intent is to simultaneously play a different chord of the reading mind from that being predominately worked on by the poem, reminding us of the non-epic, so to speak, the overwhelming multiplicity of discrete fact, event and subjective experience that necessarily eludes generalization—thus to some degree counteracting the tendency for imagistic presentation to ossify into typicality. Sometimes these passages appear as deliberately fragmentary or perhaps as a conversation very imperfectly overheard, such as the elliptical Mickey Mouse passage (63) that is evidently extracted from the newspaper. At other times there is a slightly surrealistic touch of incongruous combinations, such as the parenthetical lines that seem to be about a flood (77). There are even echoes of passages associated with Ricky from “A”-2 and “A”-3, with their erotic and homoerotic suggestion (87). There are enough of these sorts of passages to convince that they are not simply occasional lapses into eccentricity. Such passages counterpoint the static tendencies of the predominate collage method, with its fixed snapshots of history or contemporary reality or its scraps of reflective or theoretical discourse. These subjective passages are nominalistic in tendency—the decomposition process is foregrounded in the Micky Mouse example by the frequently marked ellipses—the release of words back into some pre-syntactic state of as yet unrealized potentiality. This then functions to activate a dialectical process in the act of reading itself—as the reading mind progressively absorbs the connections, analogous and metonymic, of the major collage pieces, there is encountered the occasional dispersive or indigestible segment, or at least segments that are operating in a different register.

The very structure of “A”-8 brings together a wide range of different voices and discursive textures that invariably qualify and problematize the truth content of any given piece. Whether we conceive of this structure as essentially collage or interlacing threads—somewhat analogous to the alteration between the particle and wave models—the method

tends to sap the assertive force of any particular in isolation. In this respect at least, Zukofsky's analogy with the structure of a fugue and the effort to construct a coherent polyphony makes some sense. "A"-8 does in fact make an argument, but it does so formally or structurally by suggesting complexes of analogies that are never precisely equal. To a significant degree the persuasiveness of the movement is dependent on a historical sense of crisis to which it is attempting to respond and also to future historical developments, especially the longer term outcome of the Soviet experiment. By taking onboard Marxist materials, Zukofsky is adopting a rhetoric of political commitment, a rhetoric that immediately signals a set of allegiances and antagonists. Structurally, however, he attempts to complicate and imbricate these implications by situating them as rhetorical and historical, which, as Zukofsky no doubt intended, would have been quite evident at the time and elicited the inevitable complaint that his work lacked forthright commitment.

From this perspective the concluding ballade, which Zukofsky seems to have added as an afterthought on completing "A"-8, is an appropriate conclusion to the movement since it foregrounds while trying to resolve the tension between abstract form and the scattered particulars of its content. In reading this set piece one is forced to alternate one's focus between the abstract, pre-given ballade form and the snippets of phrases and images it contains, and in that sense compelled to enact the dialectic of labor, although it is questionable whether there is any convincing resolution of the tension. Presumably such a resolution would be realized as or in the textual music, particularly since the majority of the identifiable bits of information concern Bach and his music. Indeed, as disrupted as the lexical level of the text is, we do find the explicit naming of Bach near the beginning of the ballade and the "Men of Madrid" towards the end, which might be taken as a gestural encompassing of the broad range of "A"-8's subject matter from Bach's performance of *St. Matthew Passion* to the much later mention of contemporary events in Spain and the challenge of holding all this together in one thought, above all the twisted relations between art and politics. As many commentators have noted, for all Zukofsky's evocation of music, his poetry rarely strikes us as musical in any conventional sense. This is only more obvious in those various cases, as here, where Zukofsky adopts elaborate traditional forms—including "A"-7, "Mantis," and "A"-9. Given his dismissal of conventional meter evident in his survey of "American Poetry 1920-1930" (*Prep+* 138-139) and his jeering at the "sonneteers" in "A"-1 (3), we can see that in the "sonnets" of "A"-7 Zukofsky is deliberately assaulting the form as lyrical as normally understood, aggressively breaking up any sense of a driving meter to create a highly jerky effect. For the present I would simply suggest that whatever is implied in Zukofsky's constant references to music as an image of poetry's aspirations, these high-structured works such as the concluding ballade of "A"-8 assume the possibility and desirability of new ears. Which may be the same as saying these works foreground their painful irresolution, the gap between the poem's aspirations and the indescribable suffering in Spain. The poem's realization is inexorably that of society's.

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