

One of the few critical truisms about “A” is that “A”-9 is a “crux” or pivot of the poem considered in terms of its overall chronological trajectory. Written on either side of World War II, the move between the two canzones from using Marx as the primary source for the content in the first half to Spinoza in the latter half has been taken to mark a decisive reorientation from the political and public to love and the private. The first half of “A”-9 is easily the most discussed movement of “A”, testifying to the fascination of this intricate effort to lyricize Marx, whereas attention to the second half is comparatively paltry, as if it merely repeats the exercise but registers a loss of nerve as Zukofsky turns to abstract ideas of love in place of more bracing accounts of the fear and loathing of commodification.<sup>1</sup> While rehearsing Marx on commodity fetishism is virtually de rigueur for any critical analysis of the first half, little or no knowledge of Spinoza seems sufficient to discuss and often disparage the latter half. It would be salutatory if we moved away from the fixation on “A”-9 as the narrative pivot of “A”, but the temptation to indulge in a few points first is difficult to resist.

“A”-9 is the most complicated of Zukofsky’s series of poems that adhere strictly to an intricate traditional form to generate dense and strikingly modernist works. “A”-7 (sonnets), “Mantis” (sestina), the coda to “A”-8 (ballade), “A”-9 (canzone) and “A”-11 (ballade) work with forms considered long obsolete and, with the exception of the sonnet, little used in English as exercises in compacting: the artificially imposed form suggests a musical wholeness permitting a radical fragmentation of the internal content whose principle of coherence allows any word or phrase to potentially relate simultaneously to any other word or phrase. When he republished the first half of “A”-9 in *Poetry*, Zukofsky noted Dante’s remark that the canzone “embraced ‘the whole art of poetry,’” indicating his own ambitions for his poem, which in the hands of Cavalcanti and Dante had attempted to marry those old antagonists, philosophy and poetry.<sup>2</sup> Also “A”-9, following on “A”-7, establishes the alteration of these dense, centripetal movements with much looser collage-style movements (“A”-8, “A”-10, “A”-12), moving away from the comparatively homogenous style of the first six movements. The first half or first version of Zukofsky’s canzone is the last work in which Marx figures prominently, and when he returns to compose the second half almost a decade later everything has changed both personally and historically.

The common assumption that the use of Spinoza and the theme of love for the second half was a decision made subsequent to the completion of the first half is untenable. Since the *First Half of ‘A’-9* was initially published (1940) as such, Zukofsky intended from the outset that there be a matching canzone, and although I am not aware of any explicit evidence one way or the other, there is no reason to believe he did not have Spinoza in mind from the outset. When he sent an early strophe of the second half to Niedecker, he noted that Marx is

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<sup>1</sup> There are at least a dozen articles or chapters that entirely or significantly discuss “A”-9. While all discuss the first half, only half give more than cursory consideration of the second half, and most of the latter evidence a shaky grasp of Spinoza. An exception is the too little known and highly personal reading by Norman O. Brown, “Revisioning Historical Identities,” *Apocalypse and/or Metamorphosis* (1991): 158-178. What probably represents the canonical reading of the first half of “A”-9 is Michael Davidson, “Dismantling ‘Mantis’: Reification and Objectivist Poetics,” *Ghostlier Demarcations: Modern Poetry and the Material Word* (1997): 116-134.

<sup>2</sup> “[Contributors] Notes,” *Poetry* 58.3 (June 1941): 172. Zukofsky often repeated variations on Dante’s remark: see *The Writings of Apollinaire* 184, “A” 162, *Prep+* 9, 224, *Bottom* 392.

in Spinoza but with the hell taken out,<sup>3</sup> and there are some indications that Zukofsky thought of Marx and Spinoza in conjunction: the invocation of “A”-8 rewrites Spinoza’s famous Nature as creator / Nature as created (previously quoted in “A”-6 in the context of his formulation of “an objective” (22-23)) in terms of labor (43). In any case, Zukofsky stated unambiguously when he sent Pound the first half in 1940 that the second half would have love as its theme (*EP/LZ* 203), so this particular turn was not a matter of subsequent rethinking about the movement. More to the point, as Norman O. Brown has pointed out, “A”-9 is a translation of sorts whose “original” is Cavalcanti’s oblique philosophical canzone on love, so that the topic of love is not a new theme and emphasis introduced by the second half of “A”-9, but what the first half is about to begin with (168-170). We miss the point if we fail to recognize that Zukofsky is presenting Marx as a love poet, that the thing that expresses the pangs of commodification is an expression of love thwarted.

Without denying that there are significant historical and personal changes that impact on the two halves of “A”-9, we might be better off taking seriously their explicit formal continuity and consider them in terms of their interplay as companion works, somewhat like Milton’s “Il Penseroso” and L’Allegro.” In this case, the first half is only fully realized in relation to and in light of the second, and the Marx material of the first—that is, the theories on commodification—is less important as an interpretive paradigm for determining the reading of the poem than the actual poeticizing process to which that material has been submitted that results in the poem. The usual way to read the first half, about which there is general critical consensus, is as giving voice to the thing suffering the alienation, abstraction and reification of commodification, but by doing so in the intricate and sensuous form of the canzone, the poem itself resists and offers an alternative to these negative forces: the poem offers itself as a made sensuous object outside exchange value. From this perspective, one implication Zukofsky might be concerned with is to counter the abstractions in Marx’s own discourse, so he latches onto one of Marx’s literary flourishes in a largely theoretical argument, reconfiguring the latter in terms of the former. It is too often overlooked that in picking up on Marx’s satiric image of things speaking, Zukofsky turns the use of this figure inside out: in Marx things speak as commodities and therefore mouth the platitudes of the apologists for capitalism, the point being that their memory of their prior nature has been repressed, which is the essential mechanism of their fetishism, so that commodities appear to have intrinsic (monetary) value; whereas in Zukofsky the thing remembers all too well where and what it came from (labor), which is why it is protesting so vigorously against being turned into a commodity.<sup>4</sup>

It is not merely that Zukofsky is poeticizing Marx—an effort he surely knew would be little appreciated by official representatives of the Left—but also “translating” Marx in such a way that the text resonates throughout the larger cultural body of texts, and in this sense resisting the abstracting and tendentious tendencies which were the common fate of Marx’s writings. This in fact is how Zukofsky summarizes his intentions in the first half: that the poem should “fluoresce” the complex of seven centuries of textual matter (*First Half* 1). Thus Marx or more precisely Marx’s texts are pressed back into the broader contexts and traditions of the meaning and possibilities of “inventive existence” (*Prep*+ 60) so that the impulses that drive Marx are recognized to be no different from those that drive, or should drive poets. As suggested, the “turn” to love in the second half, “A”-12 and *Bottom*, is already inscribed in the choice of Cavalcanti in the first half, and love remains the privileged term for articulating

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<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Barry Ahearn, *Zukofsky’s “A”: An Introduction* (1983): 114.

<sup>4</sup> Zukofsky used the Everyman’s Library edition of *Capital* translated by Eden and Cedar Paul, and the figure in question appears at the end of the famous chapter on “The Mystery of the Fetishistic Character of Commodities” (58).

existence and poetry, not because it is more subjective and private, but quite the opposite: it is a term, irregardless of its frequent debasement, that marks a discursive space where articulations of the most fundamental senses of existence intersect and debate across eras and cultures (texts), and therefore, since Zukofsky does not believe in linguistic obsolescence, where social resonances can be maximized. For Dante and presumably for Cavalcanti as well, the issue of love subsumes the cosmos. We note Zukofsky's interest in awakening the dead, so that Marx on the commodity form is an argument about the capitalistic mechanism of keeping dead voices dead in contemporary society, while the poem is an effort to activate the embodied social inheritance. This is not a matter of identifying specific voices—it is doubtful that most readers would even recognize Marx in "A"-9 if they were not clued in beforehand—but rather of the mutual activation of poem and reader, which assumes that the "labor process" of the poem's production, involving that mutual recognition and enlargement described in "A"-8 (61-62), is to a greater or lesser degree reenacted in the reading process, itself an act of culture reproduction.

Another point about the relationship between the two halves is that the second half was not simply a repetition of the same model with Spinozian materials, but rather it is an explicit rewriting of the first. All the same rhyme words, both internal and terminal, are carried over into the second half, with occasional ingenious variations. This means that in the first stanzas 70 of 154 syllables are carried over (although thereafter it is roughly a third), including a large portion of the key words—both first stanzas for example include: related, equated, labor, abstraction, resemblance, natural use, exchanges, changes and estranges. Which is to say, there is inscribed into the second half a good deal of Marx, and in actuality the vocabulary of Spinoza is not nearly as present in the second half as Marx's is in the first. More importantly, the second half translates the first half in the sense of attempting to realize what the thing in the first half strives to be: a vision beyond commodification. This vision, "eye to action sees," is designated "love," conceived not as some metaphysical or mere wishful well-being, but that very desire that compels the thing in the first half to bewail its perverted and obstructed nature. Essentially that perversion is a matter of abstraction, the imposition of an abstract measure that represses all particularity, difference and sensuousness. Love, then, is the recuperation of a vision that sees things in their particularity: rather than things being "related as equated values," subsumed under abstractions, they are seen as non-hierarchically interrelated, distinct and equal: "related is equated" (108). In love, "labor / Men see," since the vast accumulation of human endeavor is seen as present in things, and "abstraction they feel," since what was abstract is experienced as tangible, that is, no language is inherently abstract since it is necessarily material, although either the specific verbal articulation or readerly habits tend to repress this materiality. All of this is surely utopian, yet not mere dreamy assertion if one grants the possibility and necessity of imaging an alternative to the dominance of commodification.

The coda to the second half decisively intrudes a darker note: "Love speaks: 'in wracked cities there is less action'" (110). For Spinoza, all entities endeavor to maximize their action, which is essentially the same as maximizing their power, reality, pleasure, perfection and so on. While the *Ethics* tends to focus on maximizing power within oneself, so to speak, Spinoza's entire philosophy is premised on the idea that we exist immanently within the totality (God-Nature), so that any self-realization is severely circumscribed by the relative self-realization of the society in which we find ourselves. The best interest of the individual is in fact identical with the best interest of society, which is precisely the argument of Spinoza's political treatises, although Zukofsky does not appear to have paid any attention to these until

the 1960s.<sup>5</sup> “Wracked cities” certainly alludes to the recent war, but equally this looks to the vision expressed in the first half in which things and people are unable to realize themselves. If Zukofsky emphasizes vision here as if the problem were simply a matter of seeing aright, this is because this is what poems (or philosophy) do, attempt to evoke the feel of what could and should be, which is a matter of releasing repressed possibilities. But undoubtedly by the time Zukofsky writes the second half, he has largely lost hope that the “wracked cities” can be significantly changed for the better, that there is hardly a language in which to articulate such possibilities on a public scale. This in no sense entails the belief that Marxism is mistaken—in Spinoza error is always a matter of limitation and incompleteness rather than something intrinsically faulty—but simply that, in the West at least, its historical moment as a transformational public discourse has passed for the time being.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Through the writing of “A”-12 and *Bottom* in the 1950s, all evidence indicates that Zukofsky’s reading of Spinoza was limited to the *Ethics* and *On the Correction of Human Understanding*, which appear together in the Everyman’s Library edition he owned translated by Andrew Boyle, plus the early *Short Treatise on God, Man and Human Welfare*, which he also owned. Sometime in the early 1960s Paul Zukofsky gave his father the R.H.M. Elwes edition of Spinoza, which includes the two political treatises and a selection of letters, all of which are used quite extensively in “A”-21, and there is also a clear reference to the *Theologico-Political Treatise* in “*Golgonoozà?*” (1965) on William Blake (*Prep*+ 41-42).

<sup>6</sup> For further discussion of “A”-9 (first half), specifically in dialogue with Pound, see Z-Notes commentary on Zukofsky, Williams & Pound.