

“Hamlet Adams”: Zukofsky and Henry Adams

Jeffrey Twitchell-Waas

In many respects Zukofsky cut his intellectual teeth with Henry Adams in choosing him as the subject for his MA thesis at Columbia, and along with Shakespeare and Spinoza, Adams looms most persistently in Zukofsky’s mental universe. While Zukofsky’s early attraction to Henry Adams has struck some as odd, it is not always sensible to speculate too closely on how undergraduates acquire such enthusiasms. When he wrote his thesis in 1924, Adams was a fresh topic, and *The Education of Henry Adams* had only recently been published in 1918, a few months after Adams’ death. Zukofsky’s thesis evidences a remarkably thorough reading across Adams’ abundant and various corpus, commenting on minor as well as all major works. This initial absorption in Adams supported by periodic returns, especially to *The Education* and *Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres*, manifested itself less in the adoption of specific ideas or arguments than in a critical empathy for Adams’ general attitude or sensibility, one might even say a style of thought—what Zukofsky would later call a “valid scepticism” (*Prep.* 167).¹

While Zukofsky drew on Adams in a variety of ways, as one would expect it is his reflections on history and its very possibility that Adams registered his most sustained impact on the poet. Given a lifetime dominated by wars, both hot and cold, and bewildering technological and scientific transformations, it is little wonder that Zukofsky and most everyone else found the question of history unavoidable. That Zukofsky adopted a very different stance toward history than, say, Pound, can to a significant degree be attributed to his affinity with Adams. The following discussion will attempt to avoid over-speculation by focusing on instances where Adams appears directly in Zukofsky’s writing, while sketching their larger implications. I have organized this discussion around three overlapping topics: the intellectual in crisis, historical scepticism, and the historical-cultural centrality of women and the family.

I – The Intellect in Crisis

The Education of Henry Adams is not really an autobiography—one does not read it to find out about Adams’ life—rather it is a novelized portrait of epistemological crisis, that is, a speculative analysis of the problem of knowledge in modernity. Adams’ reiterated judgement as to the “failure” of his never-ending education is of course not to be taken at face value, except as symptomatic of his sense of always feeling out of step with his time. However, this sense of inexorable belatedness is simply a variation on innumerable versions of the alienation and homelessness so often taken as the hallmark of the modern condition or at least of the artist-intellectual. Adams’ “failure” is predetermined because the knowledge or education he claims to be seeking is by definition inadequate to and thus unavailable under current historical conditions, except as this very sense of belatedness, of aspiring for an

¹ For discussions of Zukofsky’s interest in Henry Adams, see Barry Ahearn, *Zukofsky’s “A”*: *An Introduction* (1983): 79-90; Sandra Kumamoto Stanley, *Louis Zukofsky and the Transformation of a Modern American Poetics* (1994): 26-45; Mark Scroggins, *The Poem of a Life: A Biography of Louis Zukofsky* (2007): 37-47.

imagined sense of being and completeness that is always past or elsewhere. This is inscribed in the narrative structure of *The Education* itself, in which the only possible adequate education or knowledge is precisely the ceaseless inquisitive process it recounts but whose open-endedness is always felt to be somehow insufficient. The motif of “education” serves Adams to define himself as always in process rather than the fully achieved individual that the autobiographical or bildungsroman genres conventionally presume to explain and that he presents his forefathers as exemplifying.

Zukofsky presents his essay on Adams as a companion piece to *The Education*, a chronologically organized tour through virtually all Adams’ considerable published writings. The thesis of “Henry Adams” is to demonstrate the dynamic between the contending forces in Adams’ makeup: “poetic intellect” versus the “detached mind” (*Prep.* 86)—a dynamic that is not argued so much as illustrated through the presentation of quotations. This thesis is hardly remarkable since Adams in general and *The Education* in particular has typically been seen as a complex ranging from the literary to the scientific and the tensions this throws up. Indeed, the distinction is little more than that between body and mind or the experiential and the analytic, which throughout *The Education*, Adams speaks of as projected in terms of unity and multiplicity. While these latter terms refer to socio-historical forces, it is never clear to Adams himself whether they are anything more than subjective projections, and it is precisely the inability to definitively bridge this gap, to find a subjective sense of belonging within some objective sense of order, that is his perpetual quandary.

The overall intent of Zukofsky’s essay is to emphasize the “poetic intellect,” the “undertow,” that is too often overlooked for the “strong surface current” of the “detached mind.” If we were talking about a simple dichotomy, one might think “poetic mind” versus “detached intellect” would be more straightforward, but Zukofsky recognizes perfectly well the necessary interpenetration or chiasmic structure of this antithesis. Adams, however, represents an acute case of what has often been taken to be definitive of modernity or even of the birth of philosophy or knowledge itself in self-consciousness, the mind as detaching and splitting itself off from the grounds of the experiential—in many respects, as we would expect, a classic Romantic dilemma. On a number of occasions Zukofsky refers to “Hamlet Adams,” conflating Adams with perhaps the most famous English literary example of this condition pushed to extremity (see “A”-12.176 and 192). The condition or perspective of detachment that prevents the sense of unity is famously inscribed in the third person narration of *The Education*, which pretends to be an autobiographical account. To further complicate this split *The Education* was written as a complement or dialectical counterpart to *Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres*, which offers an elaborate depiction of the personal and cultural pre-fall or “unity” whose contemporary equivalent the narrator of *The Education* is supposedly attempting to find.

Adams, particularly in *The Education*, represents the problem of self-consciousness that can become paralyzing and solipsistic, symptomatic of a historical condition where abstract social forces tend to define human relations. In the historical interplay between unity and multiplicity, Adams cannot distinguish objective historical conditions and subjective projections, thus he tends to be trapped in his Hamlet-like state. While Zukofsky admired his intellectual scepticism, Adams also represented an impasse. The essential problem is Adams’ inability to accept living with others, even while in many respects he recognized the historical

forces enabling such an acceptance. Zukofsky tends to present Adams as a rigorously accurate examiner and prognosticator of history, yet as personally unable to reconciling himself to the historical conditions he himself discerned. This of course is no more than what Adams himself says over and over again in *The Education*.

Nevertheless, in “Henry Adams” Zukofsky foregrounds the undertow of the poetic and thus the unifying strand in Adams’ thought and writings. If Adams’ intellectual scepticism can lead to solipsistic paralysis, at the same time it is closely akin to a species of negative capability, a refusal to allow the analytical to overwhelm or repress the infinite variety of the particular: “The historian must not try to know what is truth, if he values his honesty; for, if he cares for his truths, he is certain to falsify his facts” (*The Education* 457; qtd. “A”-8.70).² The ceaseless inquisitiveness that never finds any answer entirely satisfactory maintains an open curiosity for the richness of history despite its apparent disorder and meaninglessness. Adams’ “poetic intellect” is this keeping in play the complex of elements and is manifest above all in his elaborately ironic and witty style. In the original published version of “Henry Adams,” Zukofsky included an introductory chapter that surveys various disapproving critiques of *The Education*, including Adams’ two brothers, who all tend to read the work in earnest late-Victorian manner as a moral-philosophical account, which is then judged as insufficiently serious and thus irresponsible—in other words, at least implicitly tending toward moral nihilism.³ Zukofsky reads Adams’ ironic wit not as morally self-defeating but as the very mark of his affirmative belief and curiosity, even while dismantling argument after argument, not least his own. This in turn explains Zukofsky’s extensive reliance on quotations in his presentation of Adams.

In *Bottom: on Shakespeare* (1963), Zukofsky will slightly retool the dichotomy he uses in the Henry Adams essay as “eyes” versus “mind” and explore innumerable instances and consequences of this figural schema. It is worth recalling that in proposing this schema as a reading of Shakespeare he states Shakespeare’s works are all “tragic,” regardless of genre or superficial plots—the ideal proportion or balance between “eyes” and “mind” or “poetic intellect” and “detached mind” is always achieved at best momentarily and asymmetry predominates (*Bottom* 15). However, this imbalance is boundlessly creative and inventive, desire drives the need to overcome it, since after all this asymmetry is simply something like the human condition—call it mortality or the impossibility of perfect understanding between others. This, then, is the undertow of Adams’ writings, as of all writing. In *Bottom*, not only is this “tragic” dichotomy implicitly generative of the body of texts that are Shakespeare, but

² *The Education of Henry Adams* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1961).

³ There are three public versions of “Henry Adams: A Criticism in Autobiography”: 1) Zukofsky’s MA thesis at Columbia University (1924), which I have not seen; 2) a revised version published serially in *Hound & Horn* (April-Dec. 1930), which Zukofsky dated 1928/29; 3) the version revised yet again for inclusion in *Prepositions* (1967). As was typical of all the pre-World War II essays he prepared for *Prepositions*, his revisions are almost entirely deletions here and there, the major instance being the 5-page introductory chapter surveying critical responses to Adams (*Hound & Horn* 3.3 (April-June 1930): 334-339). The other major revision was the uncharacteristic addition of a long quotation on history as force from *The Education* (*Prep.* 119-122), although it is possible this quotation is reinserted from his thesis.

also of the endlessly baroque performances and sentences that are *Bottom* itself. But in *Bottom* and Zukofsky generally what we have is not so much a split mind as a figural mechanism that is necessarily symptomatic of a historical-cultural condition but which in Zukofsky's textual play performs its momentary overcoming where eyes and mind, feeling and intellect, "I" and others, text and reader come together or, as he liked to put it, intertwine. Unity, as Zukofsky understands it, is not a merging but a dynamic entanglement and interchange—existing with others.

When Zukofsky published "Henry Adams" serially in *Hound & Horn* (1930-1931), he added a "postscript" that is actually a review of William Carlos Williams' *A Voyage to Pagany*.⁴ Aside from simply slipping in a plug for Williams, the justification for tacking this onto the Henry Adams piece is the comparison of the novel with *Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres*: two American confrontations with the Old World. Adams goes to Europe seeking an image of the cultural unity he needs, which he finds in 13th century France—an image that in every respect is foreign to this heir of a quintessential "American" family: European, medieval and Catholic. It is necessarily an intellectual appropriation of European culture entailing a mortification of "instinct." Its triumph is *Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres* itself, but this is an isolate achievement, as much a projection of his own inner need as historical fact. Zukofsky observes that throughout there is a pervasive tragic note (as he also says of Shakespeare in *Bottom*); not only is the image of unity Adams discovers in the past, it is only because it is past and finished that it can be experienced as a complete whole. Like so many, Adams finds in Europe a past that can only be aesthetically resurrected. Yet at the same time, *Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres* is clearly a political projection, an elaborate vision where the subjective or existential is isomorphic with the social, which both realize themselves in the great collective projects of the cathedrals.

Williams on the other hand goes to the Old World not to find some cultural ideal, but an experiential spring. The sense of constantly beginning again that produced the great monuments of European culture can only be continued by re-enacting the creative spark rather than by resurrecting the monumental rubble that survives. This then becomes Williams' definition of the "local," inventing anew out of the materials and circumstances at hand, which requires not a refusal of history but a shrugging off of its burden. Zukofsky notes the apparent plotlessness of Williams' *A Voyage to Pagany*, as the protagonist pursues an impressionable and open-ended journey that refuses to resolve into the unity that Adams sought; instead there is a constant beginning again "because the Beginning comes only with the finish of what is Past" (*Prep.* 53). Williams confronts Europe as he finds it, which of course includes its past, with a non-nostalgic empathy for whatever and whoever he encounters. Zukofsky pointedly interpolates mention of "The pure products of American go crazy" ("To Elsie") as an unsentimental portrayal of American "peasantry"—at a time few recognized the achievement of *Spring and All*. In his other major piece on Williams from the

⁴ "Beginning again with William Carlos Williams (Postscript to 'Henry Adams')," *Hound & Horn* 4.2 (Jan.-March): 261-264. This postscript appears in *Prepositions* as the third section of "William Carlos Williams" (*Prep.* 51-53), which as a whole consists of three different essays on Williams presented in reverse chronological order. There is a fourth article on Williams that serves as the final section of "American Poetry 1920-1930" (*Prep.* 148-151), which was published at the same time as the serial publication of "Henry Adams."

same period, the concluding section of “American Poetry 1920-1930,” Zukofsky also makes the point about overcoming self-isolation; as he puts it, Williams becomes conscious of his own needs through the breaking down of the isolated souls around him (*Prep.* 151). This then is a unifying sense that is not dependent on a conception that is whole because it is past, but is the ongoing sense of reciprocal interaction in the present. However, although Zukofsky does not make this point, if we take *The Education* as a dialectical complement to *Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres*, then we find history reconfigured in the former more along the lines of Williams, but here each encounter or episode turns out to be a dead-end that requires the protagonist to start over again. If the protagonist sees this always beginning again as a sign of failure, the narrative itself belies that judgement, but I will suggest that what Zukofsky recognizes as Adams’ limitation is his inability to recognize others.

The postscript (composed in 1928, the year Zukofsky began “A”) hints at a number of ideas that will have a far reaching impact on Zukofsky’s thinking. Already he is developing his own implicit critique of American expatriates and asserting the importance of Williams even over that of Pound for the future of American poetry (see Z-Notes commentary on Zukofsky, Williams & Pound). Zukofsky implies that the distinction he identifies between Adams and Williams is not so much a personal failure on the part of the former as the difference of 24 years, which, although he does not explicitly say so, is decisively defined by World War I and the Russian Revolution. Adams’ limitations are those of his historical situation and the lack of a viable political alternative, even though we will see that he intuited the historical changes that offered a way out of the impasse in which he felt caught. These alternative views of history—history as a nostalgic source to be resurrected or as “now” wherein all past and future, actualized as well as unrealized, is present—will be of fundamental importance to Zukofsky.

“1892-1941” (1941)

Initially, the title of this poem (*CSP* 91) is likely to strike most readers as a riddle, but as one recognizes that the setting is a cemetery, the dates suggest an inscription on a gravestone. If the latter date indicates the present of the poem, the former date requires that the reader recognize its subject is Henry Adams and that behind the poem stands an important passage from *The Education*. However, Zukofsky does not directly identify this latter reference, and to begin with it is worth considering the poem as it presents itself rather than immediately evoke its textual ghost—particularly since the poem itself is concerned with problems of interpretation.

The bulk of the poem is meticulously descriptive, focusing on an enigmatic statue and the larger monument within which it is set, which we gradually learn is located in a cemetery. The poem thus overtly re-presents a symbolic figure demanding interpretation, which obviously enough is a figure for the problem of reading the poem itself. Although predominately descriptive, the poem is framed by two proverbial-like statements that one might imagine as inscribed on a gravestone and that tease us with possible interpretations. The opening sentence appears to announce the poem’s theme in paradoxical fashion: “To be moved comes of want, tho want be complete / as understanding.” “Want” means both desire and lack, two meanings we expect together and are mutually defining. Yet, paradoxically, desire is “complete” because “understanding” will never be more complete for all its efforts

to fill its sense of lack—it is like an ontological given always already assumed by whatever it does or thinks. Or, somewhat differently, the conceptualizations of the understanding draw a circle around want, making it complete, yet want is by definition that which can never be whole or contained. In either case, we recognize this as an image of the self-reflexive mind, driven by a sense of lack that demands understanding or explanation, even though that very process only generates an ever-increasing sense of lack, of distance from the desire its presumably attempts to satisfy. This, then, is another version of the “poetic intellect” and “detached mind” dialectic that haunted Adams and is the dilemma at the heart of *The Education*.

The description that preoccupies most of the rest of the poem is deliberately stilted and built up out of short phrases whose interconnections are elliptical or seem to deflect attention in a somewhat cubist-like manner to larger contexts or peripheral details. There is considerable descriptive detail of the monument, but just as the site itself offers absolutely no indication of who is buried there, the details of the poem remain rather inertly resistant to meaning. But then this is a gravesite, so what is there to say in the face of mortality other than the concluding, unascribed quotation: ““One’s instinct abhors time””? Death stands as that ultimate unanswerable question that nonetheless frames our existence, the lack that we instinctively must fill with the knowledge we know will always fall short. The grave or monument itself manifests precisely that instinct to cancel time while acknowledging its impossibility.

In the final five lines (a stanza plus a concluding line on its own), the word “gravel” appears three times. We are meant to hear and see “grave,” as well as think of the earth or mere matter—unrefined dust—to which death returns us. As we will see below, Zukofsky elsewhere draws attention to the etymology of Adams’ name: Adam = earth or ground. We are told that one “must skirt or cross” the circle of gravel to approach the statue, which suggests the inclination to avoid the fact of the gravel in preference for the symbolic “meaning.” This is, we are told, a circle of “purposeful gravel”—a curious enough phrase to give pause. “Purposeful” because readable in the manner already suggested, but also “purposeful” because an integral part of this monument or text.

This gravesite is of course that of Henry Adams, who commissioned it for his wife, Clover, who died a suicide in 1885. Adams discussed the design of the monument with his friend, the prominent American sculptor Augustus Saint-Gaudens, then spent several years on world travels, primarily in Asia and the South Pacific. Only on his return in 1892 did he visit the completed gravesite—a visit he describes in *The Education*, although he makes absolutely no mention of his wife (*The Education* 329; qtd. *Prep.* 109). The entire site is substantial for a private grave, with a raised platform on which the bronze statue sits, backed by a large slab and before it a long curved marble bench or seat that also marks one limit of the monument complex. As mentioned, there is no inscription or other indication of who is buried here other than two inter-locking wreaths carved in relief on the backside of the supporting slab. The statue of a robed seated figure with head covered was popularly titled “Grief,” as Zukofsky mentions in the third line, but Adams firmly rejected this designation and resisted any specific naming of the sculpture (although Saint-Gaudens gave it the portentous title, “The Mystery of the Hereafter and The Peace of God that Passeth Understanding”). The point for Adams was that the statue should be an enigma, which is the same as provoking the diversely

incompatible interpretations of individual viewers. Adams' description of his visit in *The Education* is primarily concerned with such interpretations, describing visitors' need to explicate the statue and give it an allegorical name, but which are all simply their own projections. At the same time Adams repeatedly says that Asiatics would intuitively "understand" the work, like death, by simply accepting it rather than insisting on a meaning. This may be the sense of "understanding" meant in the opening sentence of the poem. Yet especially within the context of Adams' own writings, the suggestion that the monument simply means an acceptance of death cannot be taken as final, any more than we can be entirely comfortable with his primitivistic reference to Asiatics. The monument is not merely an image to be interpreted or not, but a reflexive reading site compete with bench. In other words, if its meaning is the limits of understanding, then it makes this point by stimulating the desire for understanding. The monument, as well as the description of Adams' first visit to it in *The Education*, is an interpretive black hole. For Adams personally this marks a blank, which may hold the clue to his own life as presented in *The Education*, where it is represented only by the one-page description of his visit to the grave without the slightest mention of his wife or the entire period of his marriage—a twenty-year gap in the dates of the chronology that is simply left out as beyond explication.

Zukofsky's title brings together two moments of visitation and interpretation, the first informing the latter without adding up to anything definitive. The poem itself is a substitute or echo of the monument offering itself for puzzled interpretation, which will vary with different readers and depend on what they bring to it. So two experiences or moments are superimposed, but the poem appears less interested in some comparison of perspectives than with how these two moments come together—in other words, how the past inevitably impinges on or is re-enacted in the present. Adams' description of his visit in *The Education* is freely mixed in with Zukofsky's visit in the present. As such, this is a typical graveyard poem, in which we expect ghosts, memory, history to make their presence felt as a reflection on time and mortality. In one sense the poem is replicating or re-enacting the thought of Adams' visit to and reflections on his monument, and by and large Zukofsky's poem is as teasingly enigmatic as the gravesite itself. But Adams' description of his visit in *The Education* maintains an ironic perch that asserts the statue is intended to evoke interpretations while claiming all of these interpretations are false (or only subjectively true). The ultimate irony of all this, of course, is precisely Adams' inability to live his own wisdom, generating the restless search for "education" in *The Education* and his other works, as if the totality of history was the enigma he could not simply accept. One characteristic that Zukofsky did not adopt from Adams is irony, unless it is a species of romantic irony that can live with undecidability, although his tendency is to adopt a Wittgensteinian perspective wherein the problem is usually that we unnecessarily vex ourselves with questions that by definition cannot be answered.

The last line of the fifth stanza notes that the poet is not alone but with two unnamed others (one might reasonably assume these are Celia and Paul, but in fact the poem was written a couple years before the latter was born). This line is highlighted in a peculiarly emphatic manner that deliberately jars the formal progression of an already halting poem: it is set off from its stanza and put in parenthesis, and on top of that it awkwardly intrudes into the middle of a thought, specifically the fact that Clover and Henry Adams are buried there. The

seeming implacability of death that would appear the point of the statue, of the graveyard scene, even of this poem, is as if interrupted to make the point that not only is the poet not alone but is alive while or in that he shares this experience with them. As already suggested, this is Zukofsky's implicit critique of Adams' tendency toward intellectual solipsism, his corrosive irony that keeps at arms' length the capacity to feel with others. Whereas Adams stands outside as if ironically observing other people's perspectives, the poet notes that seeing, thinking or living is always necessarily with others. In "Henry Adams," Zukofsky notes that the period of Adams' marriage was the happiest and most sociable time of his life and quotes an image of the couple as an ideal of togetherness: "An impression of oneness of life and mind, of perfect companionship, left an ideal never to be effaced" (*Prep.* 104).⁵ This suggests an explanation for Adams' debilitating irony, an explanation represented by the twenty years that silently drop out of *The Education* and imaged as the blank of this symbolic gravesite.

"4 Other Countries" (1957-1958)

In Zukofsky's long travelogue poem, "4 Other Countries," the ghost of Adams puts in an appearance when the poet and his family visit Rome (*CSP* 185-187). As the poem enters the city it predictably evokes the Coliseum, which here suggests an abstract futurist construct, ominously evoking memories of fascism, but more philosophically the vagaries of history. With a play on fall and decline that will continue further into the passage, Zukofsky alludes to Edward Gibbon, whose initial moment of inspiration for writing his great history came as he sat on the steps leading up to the Church of Ara Coeli (Basilica of Santa Maria in Ara Coeli) on the Capitoline Hill, supposedly the founding site of the city that overlooks the ruins of the Forum and empire. This is precisely where Zukofsky places us in the next moment of his poem. This in turn conjures Adams and his description in *The Education* of his first visit to Rome as a young man, sitting on these very steps and thinking about Gibbon thinking about history—a scene repeatedly evoked as a leitmotif throughout *The Education*. Unusually in "4 Others Countries," Zukofsky specifically quotes from this passage to suggest a critique of Adams. Adams thinking about Gibbon thinking about history is only able to ask himself, "—Why! / Why! ! / Why! ! !!" (*CSP* 186)—typically tormenting himself with the demand for an explanation historians, exemplified by Gibbon, are never able to satisfy. Zukofsky suggests the problem by means of puns: Adams has qualms and is shy of Chaim, a Hebrew name meaning life, because, perhaps, his own name, Adam(s), means earth—a reminder of mortality. The overt and unexpected insertion of Jewish references here alludes to Adams' anti-semitism, for which his Jewish friend (Zukofsky) is embarrassed, but is itself a symptom of Adams' insufficient embrace of life, for which he attempts to compensate by this eternal asking of questions that by definition cannot be answered. Zukofsky then quotes further from the same sentence of *The Education*, in which Adams imagines those reiterated "why"s being asked by a blind beggar sitting on the steps nearby. But Adams typically fails to recognize this neighbour and is simply projecting his own quandaries onto the other and by implication

⁵ Zukofsky's source is the introductory memoir by Adams' niece, Mabel La Farge, to a small posthumous volume of Adams' *Letters to a Niece and Prayer to the Virgin of Chartres* (Houghton Mifflin, 1920).

onto the human condition generally. Unlike Adams and Gibbon, however, this beggar is blind and therefore is not contemplating this vast image of historical decay and mortality, which is the luxury of a “tourist” such as Adams. Presumably the beggar is there living as best he can. This latter quotation from Adams ends on the word “steps,” which then lead up to heaven. What is actually at the top of the steps is the church, but Zukofsky names the original altar to heaven over which the church supposedly was built. The sequence of images Zukofsky presents are as follows: the altar to heaven, cypresses that hide stars, candles shining on or toward the cypresses. The cypresses, associated with cemeteries and mortality, although they represent life as evergreens, hide stars as conventional symbols of an unearthly heaven. Yet the stars exist on the earthly level as candles in the church whose light shines on the cypresses, which might be interpreted either as resisting, however weakly, the mortality the cypresses suggest or drawing attention to their vivid evergreenness. This overtly symbolic or allegorical reading does not seem entirely out of place given that we are situated in a church and among resonant cultural monuments. Whether this view from the steps suggests life or mortality and decay depends on what one chooses to see.

One might also see this reference to the Ara Coeli as alluding to Adams’ own speculations on the age of fetish-power, a configuration of historical energy that he himself wished to believe in, as elaborated in *Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres*, yet could not, but in which one imagines that blind beggar on the steps could. In any case the altar represents a site that has been continuously rebuilt and reconfigured to focus the desire for what Adams generally calls unity or attraction, and which I believe Zukofsky would think of as the desire to be with others, sociability. Earlier in the same passage Zukofsky mentions the Church being built on the Forum, the ruins of the Empire, and then the churches falling—the shift in number and capitalization signals the dissipation of its unifying force. Zukofsky also makes a pun on squaring the circle, not as an abstract impossibility but the squaring of pieces of marble that had oval facings, as society ceaselessly remakes itself out of whatever is inherited and to hand. This is Zukofsky’s sense of history, of perpetual re-making as cultural labor, rather than as grand explanatory narratives that usually prop up a given political ideology or national myth, such as the futurist-fascist use of the Roman Empire and the Coliseum—a ruin built to order, as Zukofsky punningly remarks (*CSP* 185).

I will consider the role of Adams and history in “A”-8 below, but for a moment if we glance over Zukofsky’s later work, we note the almost total lack of history (with the notable exception of “A”-15). This is especially striking in contrast to “A”-8 and -10, as well as to the compelling example of the *Cantos*. Yet Zukofsky never for a moment abandoned an essentially materialist and determinist perspective with regard to the larger frameworks of “history” or “society”; that is, the assumption that the individual is infinitesimal within the larger physical, social and historical forces that are infinitely beyond anyone’s comprehension yet exert their influence on every detail of any individual’s existence. However, Zukofsky is sceptical of attempts at historical explanation, which inevitably tend to be deterministic in a bad sense, creating myths serving ideological purposes. Instead, Zukofsky preferred to see everything as “now,” and “history” as embedded and latent in any observed entity: person, thing, event, word—so that history is less a chain receding back into the primordial than the swarming possibilities that make up any entity’s reality or being. This

then points to Zukofsky's late suggestion of a history without names (individuals or events), history as immanent in the words, which does not explain how something became what it is now as a culmination that tends to seem final, an actuality, but is that thing's presence or construct now as an intersection of past and future. This implies that any thing leads to every other thing, and this I have argued might be taken as Zukofsky's most fundamental principle: that everything relates and is mutually implicated.

II – Historical Scepticism

Adams is a curious case of a great historian who never convinced himself that history was possible. Famously, *The Education* ceaselessly debunks the protagonist's efforts to achieve an "education," a knowledge adequate to the present—and by implication any other attempt to do so. Adams lingers at some length over the episode when he was most directly involved in historical events. As a young man he served as private secretary to his father, the Ambassador to England during the American Civil War, when the leaders of the British government were inclined to support the Confederacy because, despite their anti-slavery convictions, they saw the splitting of the Union as a strategic weakening of a rising rival. Watching at close range and involved peripherally in the diplomatic jockeying, Adams is convinced that the British government was carrying out a deliberate policy of aiding the Confederacy and manoeuvring for the opportunity to officially recognize its independence. This episode is the most concrete and detailed in *The Education*, which is somewhat notorious for the oblique manner it refers to contemporary history on which the protagonist is constantly speculating. In this instance, however, he examines later historical evidence to critically revise his convictions at the time. For as he discovers decades later, with the publication of various political biographies and letters from the major British participants, there was in fact no deliberate anti-Union policy, but instead a rather incoherent set of actions, often at cross-purposes—a certain tendency to want to help the Confederacy but no definite agenda, resulting in fumbling and a lack of decisive action. Despite Adams' ritualistic refrain that this was another case of failed education, in fact by the time he wrote *The Education* he had learned a good deal: that one is never in a position to fully understand the complexities and competing forces of history. *The Education* itself is a compelling portrait of precisely that predicament as the condition of modernity generally.

Adams famously proposed, in the later chapters of *The Education* and in a small cluster of late essays, a scientific interpretation of history. Adams' basic assumption was simply that scientific explanation represented the most advanced mode of knowledge at present, in other words was the current criteria of truth. He therefore makes a number of speculative attempts to apply the latest scientific theories ("science" here means primarily physics) to historical events and process. However, Adams is always keenly aware that what he is doing is adopting a paradigm into which he speculatively attempts to fit historical events, that is, as explanation the scientific paradigm is figural and analogical—terms that crop up repeatedly in his arguments. This is perhaps clearest in "A Letter to American Teachers of History," an extended consideration of the second law of thermodynamics (entropy) as applied to history, in which Adams critically surveys an impressive array of scientific and sociological studies that consciously or unconsciously deploy this narrative logic, often concluding with wonderfully apocalyptic predictions. Adams notes how this logic

of entropy frequently lies side by side with progressive evolutionary assumptions, despite their seeming incompatibility. The fact that Adams is proposing the application of scientific theory to the study of history while at the same time indicating its probable impossibility has been lost on many of his readers. Or, those who do recognize this, such as his brother Brooks, often condemned Adams' flippant and nihilistic tendencies, all the more perverse for the enormous effort Henry clearly put into familiarizing himself with an remarkable spectrum of the relevant literature. However, these speculative ventures can be seen as logical extensions of *The Education*, that compulsive search for an adequate knowledge in which finally the activity of sense-making is the only knowledge that can be expected. Zukofsky certainly recognized what Adams was doing, and his chapter covering Adams' ventures into his scientific explanations of history ends with the concluding paragraph of "The Rule of Phase Applied to History," in which Adams abruptly points out that all these explanations are based on the concept of "force," about which we know nothing—it is simply an axiomatic assumption necessarily underpinning these paradigms.⁶ In concluding "A Letter" (also quoted in "Henry Adams"), Adams similarly concedes that the application of scientific laws to history remains inadequate because the fundamental assumptions of physics itself have yet to be explained. He finally suggests that a definitive solution may require "another Newton"—in other words, a complete paradigm shift. Although Adams was not aware of it, that new Newton had already appeared in the figure of Einstein, and by the time Zukofsky published his Henry Adams essay he was assiduously studying Einstein and his legacy up through the latest dramatic developments known as quantum mechanics. Although Zukofsky was well aware that Adams' science was already not up to date, he did adopt his assumption that science must be taken into account in any assessment of the present and consequently it becomes a prominent discourse in the mixed discursive field of "A"-8, which we will consider below.

Zukofsky took little from Adams' specific speculative attempts to apply scientific paradigms to history, but a great deal from his scepticism that any historical explanation could be definitive. The later Zukofsky offers a number of schematic, invariably tri-partite historical models—such as phases characterized as solid, liquid and gas—but these must not be mistaken for historical explanations or narratives. Rather these are in the nature of parables about abstraction, and since abstraction is conceived of as secondary, there is implied a prior less-abstract state out of which it arose and against which it can be measured. But at the same time, abstraction does not mark a historical fall, it always already exists. The "phase" model, which Zukofsky certainly took from Adams' late speculative writings on scientific history, is not progressive or evolutionary, but as Adams himself emphasizes, phase

⁶ A complementary text that was important to Zukofsky is Thorstein Veblen's "The Evolution of the Scientific Point of View" (in *The Place of Science in Modern Civilization*, 1919), which argues for the mythic or "anthropomorphic" underpinning of any scientific explanation—in particular the axiomatic assumption of cause and effect which cannot be directly observed or proven. Zukofsky quotes Veblen on this precise argument in "A"-8.56.13-57.5, although Veblen's typically idiosyncratic terminology somewhat obscures the point. Adams makes a similar observation: "Cause is a transcendental problem beyond our grasp"; see *The Degradation of the Democratic Dogma* (Capricorn Books, 1958): 224.

means equilibrium.⁷ Phases are different possible manifestations of a given substance—say, ice, water and vapour—determined by altering contexts or conditions. Although there are necessary sequences of phases there is no implied direction or progress or teleology. Zukofsky's general view that current circumstances suffer from an excess of abstraction simply aligns him with innumerable other critiques of modernity (including that of Adams)—it is a working assumption or stance since one must work within the circumstances one finds oneself. Zukofsky's response to the problem of abstraction was not to recover or create some prior state of affairs—the nostalgia that so strongly marks the projects of Eliot and Pound, or for that matter Adams. Rather one works with what is available to achieve a dynamic proportional work. So, taking the schematic components of poetry—image (solid), sound (liquid), intellection (gas)—the intent is not to simply turn the gas back into liquid and solid but to bring them into a proportional balance so that they enhance each other within the larger whole which itself exists dynamically with readers and society. As Zukofsky pointed out, no word is intrinsically abstract and is always available for more sensuous use or reading (*Prep.* 237-238).

Zukofsky's body of work and thought lacks a specific historical diagnosis to explain and judge the current state of affairs and thus to situate the task of his poetry, as was the case for example with Pound and Eliot. This remark must be qualified somewhat in the case of the work of the 1930s, but there are no particular golden periods—of poetry, culture, politics—that he refers back to and against which he measures other times and cultures, particularly the present. Especially the later Zukofsky is almost entirely lacking in cultural critique, and instead he prefers a hybrid sense of the present, with positive and negative elements in a mixed potential. He can be as grumpy and sardonic about the present state of America or the world as anyone and there is ample registration of "hurt" in the later work, but he does not frame this as a matter of cultural decline and specific historical developments. There are of course cultural highlights, say Shakespeare, but no special glorification of Elizabethan England, and while Shakespeare is seen as a manifestation of the forces of his times (see "Continents" chapter in *Bottom*), Zukofsky is not interested in him as a singular genius but rather as a body of surviving texts. *Bottom* seems to propose a graph of culture, yet no one has identified that graph because it is immanent in the complex collocation of mostly quotations that makes up the volume. By implication, as measured by certain poetic values, there are better and worse periods—the Romantic period for example gets very short shrift in *Bottom* and elsewhere in Zukofsky's criticism (although Blake is a partial exception)—but this is a phase-like critique: given linguistic values are more or less emphasized by given periods for whatever complex of reasons, but there is no intrinsic historical essence to measure. A different exhibition of examples will give a different history or graph. To a large extent *Bottom*, like *A Test of Poetry*, is about reading, what one's sees or does not see when one reads.

⁷ See particularly "The Rule of Phase Applied to History," *The Degradation of the Democratic Dogma* (Capricorn Books, 1958): 261f. It is worth noting that Spinozian psychology-ethics is a type of equilibrium model as well—a matter of internal adjustments to external conditions.

If we leap ahead to the end of Zukofsky's career, we might consider "A"-22 & -23 as his ultimate statement on history, where we find imbedded the wish to empty history of "names" / impertinence" (511)—although we should be wary about taking any isolated bit as an editorial comment by the poet himself. A history without names could mean without individuals and events and therefore without narrative or rational, so one is left with what might be characterized as everyday experience or a plane of existence without hierarchy. While the latter is gestured at in the framing segments of "A"-22 & -23, it hardly seems an adequate characterization of these poems. The central bodies of both poems are constructed out of textual materials presented in chronological order supposedly covering 6000 years of literate culture—predominately historical and philosophical texts in "A"-22 and literary in "A"-23. As such this would seem a rigorously historical epic argument of some kind. But this is not the case because the presentation of these materials shears them of all traces of historical order. It is impossible to discern most of the sources, there is no consistency of manner or style of presentation, much less of progression (say in the manner of Joyce's *Oxen of the Sun* chapter), indeed no evident argument or development of any kind. Instead the materiality or textuality of the source materials themselves are foregrounded and turned on themselves so that one might say their latent historicity is suggested but on such a massively overdetermined scale that any imposition of a historical narrative or explanation reveals itself as a travesty. Yet it might be argued that in engaging and reading such a text, drawing out the pleasures of its intricate surface, we sense something of the feel of "history," of the heterogeneous ongoing activity of cultural reproduction that is always present. However, such a claim obviously indulges in the very abstracting or allegorizing fantasies the poem presumably hopes to counter and balance out. There is no implied explanation vis-à-vis history but instead an attempt to evoke a feel for the density of human engagement, the reworking of linguistic materials as necessarily being with others.

"A"-22 [the Lyell-Adams passage] (1970-1973)

In the early pages of the main body of "A"-22, whose source materials are predominantly historical, there is a page and a half passage worked from Sir Charles Lyell's *Geographical Evidence of the Antiquity of Man* (1863) but interspersed with ten or so lines from *The Education* ("A" 512-513).⁸ It is not useful to read "A"-22 & -23 as dependent on their numerous sources, of which the poetry itself rarely offers any clues and which in any case are so deliberately transmuted as to suppress their authority as sources. Nonetheless, in the context of our discussion of Adams' presence in Zukofsky's work, this passage's secret history, so to speak, might be of philological interest. The passage as a whole is a cascade of physical details, material language in its most literal form—the geographical and what the geographical record preserves: evidence of flora, fauna and early human activity. One could say that the extreme heterogeneity of the physical details in the poetic passage mimics something like the confused intermixing and sedimentation of the geographical record, which by implication one is attempting to decipher. However, here and there are single lines or

⁸ For the record, there are scattered other uses of Adams throughout "A"-22 & -23, the most substantial is the plundering of *Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres* for materials used in the medieval section of "A"-23 ("A" 559).

several that suggest more abstract content, even reflection on that record: “conjecture,” “thinking of *a thought* / not his thought,” “time unchanged,” “fret changes / only himself,” “languages unconsciously sounding.” As it so happens, all of these, except for the last, derive from Adams. Although the passage’s authors are buried, as far as the reader is concerned, Zukofsky has created something of an asymmetrical dialogue between Lyell and Adams, of which we can really only discern a suggestion of the struggle to make sense of scattered physical evidence, that nagging need to explain that so characterizes Adams. Zukofsky’s poetry here and throughout “A”-22 & -23 deliberately sabotages such efforts at explanation for a more visceral engagement. This particular passage ends with a typical instance of Zukofsky wit: fossilized bits of white chalk that may have been strung together as beads, although the string is missing, yet still “the / bond that united them unbroken” (513). The latter is quoted, somewhat elliptically, straight out of Lyell (who is quoting someone else). But what is this unbroken bond? It is readers—whether the reader is the archaeologist who tries to decipher these bits of white chalk or the readers of Zukofsky’s poem. In either case the bonds are enacted, which of course does not mean we have solved how these bits were bonded together but that we instinctively create a bond with these slim bits of evidence of our archaic forerunners, now precariously resurrected—in this case quite literally out of an old grave. In one sense, this cascade of nounal materials is impervious to explanation, which as Adams constantly pointed out is little more than subjective projections. Yet we cannot but feel that these facts are meaningful and embody a pervasive intentionality, even as it can never be pinpointed and will be forever rearranged and re-read. That we cannot fix a definitive sense does not cancel out its pervasive meaningfulness. Indeed, Lyell’s text, as his title indicates, is a compendium of the traces left by prehistoric human activity on physical geography.

Although not particularly relevant to the reading of this passage in “A”-22, there might be some interest in the background to the Lyell-Adams conjunction, which does raise a point that will be pursued in the following. The Adams snippets are drawn from the key “Darwinism” chapter of *The Education* (Chap. XV) and a subsequent passage that refers back to this chapter (Chap. XXVI). In “Darwinism,” Adams describes his friendship with Lyell, who recruited him to write a review of a revised edition of his seminal *Principles of Geology* (1866) to help promote the work with an American audience. As an advocate of Darwin’s theory of evolution, Lyell’s particular contribution and emphasis was on uniformity: that the law of evolution implies a steady and progressive development from lower to higher, from simpler to more complex forms. For Lyell the gaps or missing links in the fossil record are merely matters of its current incompleteness, thus his assiduous collection of evidence to try to fill in these lacunae. At this time “evolution” implied a more or less steady historical progression, and we should keep in mind that Adams’ maturity was coterminous with the heyday of Herbert Spenser, whose immense reputation and influence is easily forgotten today (although Adams rarely mentions Spenser directly in *The Education*, the latter’s most famous phrase, “survival of the fittest,” is often cited and critiqued). Although Adams wrote a sympathetic review, in his reading of and discussions with Lyell he became convinced that Lyell accumulated vast amounts of evidence to bolster assumptions they failed to prove—a scepticism with which Zukofsky concurred. Emblematic of this scepticism is Adams’ often

reiterated self-identification with the *Pteraspis*, an ancient fish that survives little changed into the present and thus seems to refute the basic assumptions of progressive evolution.

Zukofsky explicitly uses the term “evolutionary” in Adams’ negative sense at the beginning of his essay, “American Poetry 1920-1930” (1931), which in its original version was presented as a sequel to *L’Influence du symbolisme français sur la poésie américaine (de 1910 à 1920)* (Paris, 1929) by his friend René Taupin.⁹ While typically over-nuanced, Zukofsky wants to aver from Taupin’s reading, which traces contemporary American modernist poetry as descending directly from French Symbolism and presents Eliot as the culmination of that legacy. Zukofsky admired his friend’s work, which was remarkably sophisticated and well ahead of any critical work on the topic in English, although a couple years later Edmund Wilson would influentially make broadly similar arguments in *Axel’s Castle* (1931). Zukofsky’s “sequel” presents no such progressive narrative, much less any linkages with Symbolism, but examines contemporary American poets in a comparative manner using the evaluative criteria of the degree to which each poet has or has not thrown off the legacy of metered verse. Aside from the critique of Eliot already set forth in “Poem beginning ‘The’” (1926), Zukofsky could hardly welcome the view that Eliot or anyone else represented a culmination of recent literary history, thus leaving himself and other younger writers as mere epigones of a narrative that had already reached its apex—a view of modernism that would only be enforced among the critical establishment in the years to come. His response to what is routinely referred to as belatedness is to refuse such “evolutionary” assumptions and instead to view everything as available for use in the present, and it is precisely modernism’s formal innovations that allow for this perspective and practice. Zukofsky’s most typical compositional practice is the self-conscious recycling of found materials, the active awareness that we always rework what we inherit and find to hand as the activity of living with others. In “American Poetry 1920-1930,” Zukofsky is concerned to peel away what is taken for granted in poetry, even semi-consciously, which primarily means regulated meter, in order to further open up the promise of free verse. This did not mean a simple rejection of conventional verse forms and Zukofsky was of course perfectly happy to recycle traditional forms, but it meant that everything had to be rethought in terms of the present.

Politically speaking, this evolutionary historical logic appeared in the guise of dialectical materialism. Zukofsky almost never uses the word “dialectics” or its variations, precisely because at that time it invariably assumed just such an historical narrative and he never cared for this particular doctrine of official Marxism. Zukofsky could perfectly well accept that capitalism’s internal contradictions would cause its downfall, as appeared already to be in process with the Depression, without accepting the inevitable succession of socialism and communism—in fact there was a stark choice: socialism or fascism (the latter often presenting itself as a middle way between its two rival ideologies).

⁹ “American Poetry 1920-1930,” *The Symposium* 2.1 (Jan. 1931): 60-84. The essay as revised appears in *Prep.* 137-151.

“A”-8 (1935-1937)

The most prominent appearance of Adams materials anywhere in Zukofsky’s work is in “A”-8, which is not surprising since it is a large-scale attempt to engage directly with contemporary history in the Poundian manner. “A”-8 (1935-1937) incorporates a broad, often bewildering range of materials, but overall two loose groups of sources provide the skeleton: American history culminating in the Great Depression and Marxism culminating in the Russian Revolution and the contemporary Soviet experiment. The American history materials (aside from depictions of the present) are primarily provided by Henry Adams and his brothers Brooks and Charles Francis Jr., whose historical writings describe the degradation of the values of the founding revolutionary fathers over the course of the 19th century—the triumph of private interests and property over the efforts at nation building in the common interest. The broad implication is that while the political ideals and historical opportunity of the American Revolution have been subverted, an analogous historical moment is taking place in Soviet Russia whose long-term fate is yet to be determined, but which provides a hope that the U.S. in its current state of crisis might recover its own revolutionary values. The question is how to graft the possibilities offered by the event of the Russian Revolution and the current Soviet Union (more as a conceptual model than its fact) onto American roots. Particularly in the context of the Popular Front (1934-1939), this was far from a unique project and Zukofsky is engaging with a larger debate on the Left about an American version of socialism.

The various materials taken from the Adams brothers are almost entirely documentary or narrative, and there is little indication that Zukofsky is calling on Henry’s speculative scientific readings of history. There is, however, a key moment where Adams links the American and Russian strands. This is provided by a description in *The Education* of a visit to Russia in 1901, from which Zukofsky quotes at some length (“A” 80-82). This Russia is a frozen anachronism, seemingly stuck in moribund stasis, yet Adams senses that this massive inertia must eventually be set in motion by the forces of history and will have world-wide consequences. In “A”-8 Zukofsky breaks off this quotation in mid-sentence at the moment Adams is articulating this last thought because we know perfectly well the subsequent historical events Adams could only intuit. The culminating meditations on contemporary history in *The Education* consider the question of Russia as crucial (439; see entire Chapter XXX, “Vis Inertiae”), and in the essay on “The Rule of Phase Applied to History,” where Adams calculates the increased velocity of seminal historical developments, he predicts that one such change of phase would happen around 1917 (qtd. *Prep.* 123). Zukofsky adamantly defended Adams against the charge that the latter was a reactionary thinker, nostalgically but pessimistically desiring to hold onto old family privileges and values.¹⁰ Although Adams often presents himself in *The Education* as an anachronism and a bit world-weary, to take this

¹⁰ In the *Hound & Horn* version of “Henry Adams,” Zukofsky added a long note specifically defending Adams against such accusations, pointing out his anticipation of the Russian Revolution and observing that it is unfortunate he did not live to offer his analysis of this event. When Zukofsky made the final revision of his essay for *Prepositions*, he incorporated a very truncated version of this note (the paragraph beginning, “Written today Adams’ thought...” (*Prep.* 124)). See also Zukofsky’s defence of Adams to Kenneth Rexroth, *SL* 46-48, 52-54.

at face value is to ignore his complexly ironic self-portrayal. *The Education* is in fact the work of a very open curiosity and of an acute observer of his times, and Adams says over and over there is little sense in bemoaning the passing of the past, much less wishing its return. As discussed above, Zukofsky understood the limitations of Adams' attitude or perspective that mark him as a man of his times; nevertheless, Adams detected the place and time of major historical change with remarkable percipience, which was not where Marx himself expected his revolution to break out.

Indeed, the question, why Russia?, was a crucial and furiously debated point on the Left precisely because it seemed to throw a spanner into the logic and expectations of orthodox Marxist historiography. The debate over how to read the Russian Revolution and its consequences thus played a major role in the factionalism among Marxists and in defining who were the true heirs of the Revolution. In this context, Adams' intuitions about Russia indicate an overdetermined sense of history in which individuals and their conscious efforts are relatively inconsequential. "A"-8 presents both Lenin and Jefferson as fathers of their respective revolutions, yet for all their careful and necessary preparations for the event, the event itself is spontaneous, an unplannable conjuncture which Jefferson describes as "like a shock of electricity" (102), a figure Zukofsky immediately notes via a quotation from Cadwallader Colden as taken from the then cutting edge discourse of science.

Since "A"-8's reading of history is discussed elsewhere (see Z-Notes commentary on "A"-8), let me simply note that the various writings from the Adams brothers help enhance the non-tendentious character of Zukofsky's Marxist allegiances in this poem. That is, in Zukofsky's view, the Adamases represented an American tradition of historical thought that was compatible with Marxism, yet could not be accused of aping the Party line. As mentioned, Zukofsky is engaging in a broad discussion on the American Left by attempting to indicate how Marxist thought could be grafted onto American principles without violence, maintaining the historical specificity of American society against dogmatic applications of Communist Party policy. The task was to draw out American precedents that had been still-born but could be recovered as the basis for a socialist re-imaging of the nation.

With this in mind, I want to consider a peculiar passage interpolated into "A"-8 (49-52), consisting of nine stanzas of nine long Alexandrian lines each, into which Zukofsky seems to have shredded pieces from many different sources (for convenience I will refer to this as the 9-9 passage). If we simply identify the dominant sources or topics, they are the *Communist Manifesto*, science, poetry, music and *The Education of Henry Adams*.¹¹ Schematically this covers the main blend of sources or topics used in "A"-8 overall and indicates the range of discourses the poem brings into conjunction, which in this particular passage are often deliberately run together. Implicitly, poetry plays a coordinating role or at least offers a space for what threatens to be compartmentalized discourses and areas of concern, and this matches the utopianism of "A"-8's effort to project an inclusive social

¹¹ The poetry quotations are apparently from an unpublished project, *A Workers' Anthology*, a historical gathering of politically conscious poetry, most of whose selections ended up re-contextualized in *A Test of Poetry*. A description and list of the contents of the anthology can be found on the Z-site page for *A Test of Poetry*.

vision where all the latent forces of the social conglomerate are coordinated for the common good.

In the final line of the sixth stanza of this passage, we find, as Sandra Kumamoto Stanley puts it, a passing of the baton: “Phase, the pit, Marx waiting, time to go, said Adams” (“A” 51; Stanley 43). This string of word-phrases comes entirely from *The Education* and appearing fairly early in “A”—8 hints at the intersection of historical narratives I have already outlined. Although too elliptically presented to qualify as an allusion, this line is partially snipped from a passage describing Adams’ first visit to England and travelling through the apocalyptic landscape of the industrialized northwest: “the revelation of an unknown society of the pit—made a boy uncomfortable, though he had no idea that Karl Marx was standing there waiting for him, and that sooner or later the process of education would have to deal with Karl Marx much more than with Professor Bowen of Harvard College or his Satanic free-trade majesty John Stuart Mill” (*The Education* 72). The stanza that follows is also predominately worked from *The Education*, including other passages that explicitly mention Marx, who is always mentioned respectfully by Adams without being engaged with in any detail. As mentioned, re-contextualizing these elliptical bits simply indicate the internal evidence for the conjunction of Adams and Marx that Zukofsky lays out more explicitly elsewhere in the poem.¹² The other significant passage Zukofsky draws on in this stanza, and somewhat more identifiable from the snippets he gives, is the final paragraph of *The Education* where Adams imagines returning after death to observe his mistakes in light of subsequent events. Aside from evidencing Adams’ open-minded curiosity about the course of history, more importantly this indicates history’s inexorable self-reflexive revisionism and the inevitable fallibility of given historical explanations. Again, we should remind ourselves of the contentious ideological context of the times, in which competing historical narratives were a central area of struggle.

Reading “A” by recovering sources is rarely very useful—these are not gists standing in for larger arguments. The real question is this passage’s peculiar cento-style presentation, which is emphasized by being rather oddly tipped into a long poem that is otherwise typically collagist in manner, except for the coda. The conjunctions of specific bits of material are ultimately subordinated to the formalistic urge of the passage toward the lyrical, even if in this case the long lines and large stanzas are somewhat lumpy.

We can read this passage as one possible culmination of the movement as a whole. The fact that it comes seven pages into a 60-page poem is sensible for a poet who rejects an evolutionary or narrative historical logic. In fact even with the larger historical argument or conjunctions of the movement, Zukofsky seems to go out of his way to subvert chronological habits: the American history passages come mainly in the latter half of the poem after the bulk of the Marxist and Soviet materials. The heavily conglomerated 9-9 passage manifests Zukofsky’s scepticism about tendentious readings of history, be they Poundian or Marxist, and therefore his insistence that a gamut of discursive registers—scientific and poetic, political and musical—need to be brought together and allowed to both critique and augment each other in the realization of an ameliorated social or poetic body. The predominate collage

¹² At one point Adams suggests he should have been a Marxist, if it were not for the constitutional resistance of his New England upbringing (*The Education* 225).

method of “A”-8 tends toward spatialization, simultaneity and reciprocity, unless it is harnessed to an argument as is often the case with Pound’s *Cantos*. It is always worth keeping in mind the deliberate diversity of forms used in “A”—both within and between movements—which reflect back on one another, and from this perspective this passage and the concluding ballade-coda remind us that no given formal presentation is definitive even when suggesting a possible culmination.

The significant presence of science in “A”-8 is worth emphasizing and follows the example of Adams. Marxism was just one of many discourses and theories of history that claimed the prestige of science as the paradigm of knowledge itself and the banishment of pre-Enlightenment pseudo-knowledges. Like Adams, Zukofsky accepted this perspective but sceptically. The adoption, albeit briefly, of the designation “Objectivist” overtly calls on a stance akin to science in which the poem is considered in the complex of contemporary realities and much of Zukofsky’s early critical writing was intent on cleaning up the residual mythopoetic traces in the elder modernists, including the fetishism of meter. However, science is always understood as a historical discourse and as such a mode of seeing—all the more intriguing because it visualizes what is largely invisible.¹³ But this is fundamentally no different than, for example, Marx on the labor theory of value, bringing to light what is unseen. Science, then, reveals its necessarily figural character. “A”-8 includes some newspaper remarks from Einstein to the effect that both the particle and wave models appear equally valid although seemingly incompatible with each other, and this is then extended to economics (49).¹⁴ For Zukofsky, here is no intrinsic incompatibility between science and other modes of discourse/knowledge, which are all manifestations of human desire as cultural labor attempting to realize an ecological sense of being in the world with others. Science is incorporated into “A”-8 because of its power and prestige in contemporary society but also to be set in dynamic relation and intersection with other discourses.

The 9-9 passage suggests that poetry becomes a space where the diverse discourses that make up the social totality as a linguistic body can come together. More fundamentally, the implication is that all these discourses tend toward the same horizon, the possibility of a realization through the enhancement of the social body. For Zukofsky this is necessarily implied in any act of language. If poetry or music designates the possibility of such an ideal realization—less as image than as affective space—this is in no way essentially different

¹³ This includes scattered references in “A”-8 to the enlargement of eyes due to the latest technological advances: e.g. x-rays (60) and high-speed and stroboscopic photography of a fly’s wings or the “crown” of a milk drop (92). The *New York Times* article in which Zukofsky found the latter information carried the title, “Super-Eye Camera Gives New Vision,” (23 Nov. 1933).

¹⁴ Zukofsky made a similar point by attaching a number of notes in the form of quotations to the brief poem *Anew* 29 “Glad they were there” (CSP 93, 103-104), written in 1938 during the same general period as “A”-8. This poem ostensibly describes a pair of dancers whose centrifugal movement is expressed geometrically and this oval figure is then found replicated in Dante, Marx (on the circulation of commodities) and Lorentz (on the motion of electrons in a field). These quotations are intended as a reading lesson, much in the manner that the note Pound attached to his version of Li Po’s “The Jewel Stairs’ Grievance” serves as a succinct guide to reading Imagist poems (*Personæ: The Shorter Poems* (1990): 136).

from the basic impetus of science. Zukofsky never considered the scientific mode of perception or knowledge as fundamentally at odds with poetry or music.¹⁵ The specific bits that comprise the passage are not by any means utopian—they are dominated by images of social breakdown and struggle—but their formal collocation is utopian in intent, and if it is meant as a political vision, it is a vision that must encompass a quite heterogeneous body.

III – Women and the Family

The emphasis on women and their superiority is one of Adams' more striking concerns, and one that Zukofsky underlined in his thesis. In his view of history as force that manifests itself in various counter-balancing forms, Adams perceived that across time and cultures (races) the single constant was sex, fertility, birth. The woman's indisputable role, as opposed to the more ambiguous part of the male, in reproduction and the care of the children is the basis of the family and hence of social cohesion—the primary social manifestation of the force of attraction. This is not merely a matter of social analogies where the family is the prototype of society, but the family as the incubator of the psycho-somatic needs that underpin the very desire for community. Thus for Adams the female represents the historical force of unity as opposed to multiplicity. This underlies the presentation of *Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres* where this unifying force reaches something of an apotheosis as Mariolatry, giving rise to the great cultural achievements of the 12th and 13th centuries in theology, literature and above all the gothic cathedrals, which are themselves epitomized in the rose windows. Their antithesis is embodied in the abbey-fortress of Mont-Saint-Michel, built in its present form primarily in the immediately preceding century or two, a nominally religious structure that manifests a militant male ethos—its literary compliment is *La Chanson de Roland*.¹⁶

Zukofsky gives some emphasis to this feminine aspect of Adams' thought, which he aligns with Adams' poetic intellect. He mentions and quickly summarizes one of Adams' early articles on "Primitive Rights of Women" that was the seed of his later views, which argues against the view that women in archaic society were slaves and claims that her "attractive force" created the family as an institution (*Prep.* 96). Zukofsky also gives what might initially appear undue emphasis to three works usually considered minor, Adams' two

¹⁵ On this point, see especially "Poetry / For My Son When He Can Read" (1946) (*Prep.* 6-10). For discussion of this important essay, see Z-Notes commentary on "A"-11.

¹⁶ For a sense of Adams' insistence on this topic, which rather exasperated his brother Brooks, a few excerpts from the "The Three Queens" chapter of *Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres*: "The proper study of mankind is woman and, by common agreement since the time of Adam, it is the most complex and arduous. [...] The superiority of the woman was not a fancy, but a fact. Man's business was to fight or hunt or feast or make love. The man was also the travelling partner in commerce, commonly absent from home for months together, while the woman carried on the business. The woman ruled the household and the workshop; cared for the economy; supplied the intelligence, and dictated the taste. Her ascendancy was secured by her alliance with the Church, into which she sent her most intelligent children; and a priest or clerk, for the most part, counted socially as a woman. Both physically and mentally the woman was robust, as the men often complained, and she did not greatly resent being treated as a man" (Doubleday Anchor, 1959: 215, 217; see also *The Education* 441-447, 458-459).

novels, both centered on women and how their potential is frustrated in contemporary society, and his book on Tahiti. The extracts Zukofsky gives from the novels involve women and storytelling as a response to and consolation for death (*Prep.* 100-104). The Tahiti book, a product of Adams' wandering in the South Pacific in the years following his wife's suicide, is an oral history as related by two Tahitian princesses in which Zukofsky highlights the significant political role of women in this culture, as well as their poetry, where poetry is not yet literature but a communal performance (*Prep.* 111-113).

It is not necessary to claim that Zukofsky simply adopted Adams' historical thesis on women to note the significance of this emphasis in Zukofsky's own work.¹⁷ It is a commonplace of Zukofsky criticism that there was a decisive shift of focus on either side of World War II from the political to the familial, but there has been little consideration of what the latter entails. Actually, the family appears importantly in Zukofsky's work from the beginning, well before his marriage and fatherhood. The crucial point is the sense of family relations—the sense of home as an affective space, of support, of love, of loyalty—as the basis for any possible or desirable social construction. This is not necessarily to fetishize the family unit as such, but represents Zukofsky's image of whatever establishes and augments this sense of being beyond vulnerability. Aristotle for his own socio-historical reasons discusses this in terms of “friendship,” upon which his *Politics* is based. Aristotelian friendship extends well beyond what we normally think of by this term (see *Bottom* 90-92), such as a mother's love for her child, which in many respects is paradigmatic of all other forms of love/friendship. Given its venerable literary history, Zukofsky prefers to stick to the term love, which the *Nicomachean Ethics* defines as the superlative degree of friendship—the key phrase is quoted in Greek as the last words of *Bottom*'s main text (443). The point here is how entwined his conception of love is with conceptions of family and children. Or, to put this another way, one notes the virtual non-existence of sexual love or the libidinal in Zukofsky's work.

As an initial example, the last two pages of “A”-15 include an extended passage composed out of quotations from that paradigm of machismo epics, the *Iliad*, beginning with Odysseus returning from his grisly night raid with Diomedes but then giving way to episodes of lamenting mothers on both sides of the Trojan conflict. Both mothers, Hecuba and Thetis, futilely attempted to prevent their sons from fulfilling their destinies, as the preeminent models of the warrior ideal, in death on the battlefield. This presentation in terms of the Trojan War fits Adams' historic-cultural arguments on women as the bonding force that makes a family, society or culture possible, as opposed to the disintegrating and ego-centered forces of the masculine ethos. Presumably, Zukofsky would assume that Homer is with the women, that poetry or song is itself a feminine force and occupation of bonding and overcoming death, as depicted in those scenes where Homer describes singers captivating their listeners in a moment of common community—“one who serves the public . . . a

¹⁷ For a brief but very suggestive paper on the “feminine” in Zukofsky, see Barbara Cole, “Wedded Words: On the dim tide’ of Feminist Criticism and Louis Zukofsky,” <http://www.writing.upenn.edu/epc/authors/zukofsky/100/program.html>.

heavenly singer at a feast.”¹⁸ The *Iliad* passage that closes “A”-15 coordinates with or acts as a chorus for the figure of Jackie Kennedy and her children as the focal image of the funeral rites for President Kennedy and therefore the possibility of emotional reconstitution at a moment of acute social trauma (see Z-Notes commentary on “A”-15).

Another striking example is an extended passage in “A”-18 worked from the anthropological writings of Bronislaw Malinowski on the beliefs of the Trobriand Islanders concerning the interrelated topics of the presence of the dead among the living and of conception (“A” 399-401). The latter does not involve the male but is the literal rejuvenation through rebirth of the spirits of the dead. Nevertheless, the importance of the “father” is recognized in nurturing the child and the passage concludes with the image of the father holding the infant—the father maternalized. This passage is explicitly linked with and counter-posed to the contemporary Trojan War taking place in Vietnam.¹⁹

Turning to earlier in his career, we might notice that in “A”-8 Zukofsky includes quotations from letters by both Marx and Jefferson that assert their family feelings—in both cases addressed to daughters (93, 102-103). Rather small details in the larger scheme of the poem, but nonetheless striking and possibly taking on further significance when contrasted with a substantial passage from an interview with Lenin who rather brusquely dismisses the personal, at least under the conditions of consolidating the revolution (91-92). Zukofsky’s admiration for Lenin as a revolutionary leader was undeniable, but that does not mean he was above criticism and the interview quotations reveal that the very pragmatic determination of Lenin also tends toward the dogmatic slighting of cultural or quality of life questions—say, the value of poetry—that characterized the various political apparatuses that carried on in his name. As argued above, such details can be read as Zukofsky’s attempt at complicating the texture of a poem that clearly has political intent, but is trying to avoid the tendentious emphaticness the exigencies of the day tended to demand. The vignettes of the Soviet Union in “A”-8 are patently utopian and channelled through the eyes of children or youths, that is, the possible future beyond the hard pragmatics of the revolution itself (59-60, 68-69). This point takes on added weight when we come to “A”-10, which predominately details the fall of France and the whole sorry sequence of events culminating with the Hitler-Stalin pact (121) and the seemingly unstoppable triumph of Fascism on both sides of the world. The movement then concludes in a puzzlingly fragmented fashion that prominently features children who have been emotionally brutalized. This failure of the family, of traumatized children fixated on death, emblemizes the most fundamental failure of society and its own future cut short. This is how Zukofsky attempts to bring home the emotional impact of the disasters read about in the newspapers or announced over the radio.

Zukofsky’s other major work of the same period as “A”-8 is the drama *Arise, Arise*, where the intersection of family and revolution is even more evident. I have discussed this play in a separate commentary, so I will not linger over it here except to repeat that it opens

¹⁸ Zukofsky quotes these phrases from Homer’s *Odyssey* in a set of historical quotations appended to his 1950 “A Statement for Poetry” (*Prep.* 223) and also in “A”-12 (162). The translation is from the popular prose version of W.H.D. Rouse.

¹⁹ See Z-Notes commentary on “A”-18, including discussion of the “emasculated conception.”

with a conversation between mother and son that enigmatically lays out the affective sense that is extrapolated out into the social in the rest of the play and culminates with a communal dance, in which even the dead have been resurrected and redeemed.

It is in *Bottom* where the topic of Zukofsky's conception of love receives its most extensive and exhausting treatment, and here I will limit myself to a passage in which Henry Adams is usefully evoked. Discussing *All's Well That Ends Well* Zukofsky mentions that Adams points out the basic similarity of the plot to that of a certain medieval novelle, and quotes his remark on the centrality and strength of women in Shakespeare's work. However, he then notes that Adams failed to hit on *Bottom*'s definition of love. It is not particularly important that we grasp this rather oblique allusion, which refers to Adams' remark that the medieval narrative is not about love but women's manly strength and their assertion of social obligations.²⁰ For Zukofsky, however, *All's Well That Ends Well* works out the theme of "woman's *loving* and therefore reasoning *eyes* desiring and forgiving who ever hates them" (305), which is simply a variation of *Bottom*'s thesis of a definition of love that underlies all Shakespeare's works. The play is in the manner of a medieval moral allegory, and in this case *Bottom*'s basic distinction between eyes and mind is allegorically gendered. As Zukofsky says, the wife's persistent love in the face of unjust rejection and humiliation seems "impossibly misplaced," but then this is an allegorical tale of the force of love as eyes, which as such cannot behave otherwise than to forgive. Zukofsky suggests this may be the most difficult version of Shakespeare's theme, by which I assume he means both difficult for us to accept and difficult for anyone to realize in practice. The play portrays Helena as anything but a passive, accepting woman, but her definition so to speak is as the force of eyes, that is, the recognition of others and of the necessity of being with others, whereas the male protagonist is blinded by excess of thought that renders him unable to recognize others and who therefore sees the real as solipsistic projections. "Reasoning *eyes*" desire others, but ultimately this requires as its extreme test the forgiving of others for their blindnesses. This is a variation on Spinoza's assertion that love can transform hate into love that Zukofsky quotes on a number of occasions, because love is what everyone necessarily aspires to by nature whereas hate is by definition a deleterious state of being.²¹ In any case, the proper response to hate is love because otherwise we take on the hatred directed at us to the detriment of ourselves and others. The point is not that the male protagonist of Shakespeare's play is a zero unworthy of such love but the affirmation of others that refutes the male's reification of ideas that are then imposed back on the real. *All's Well That Ends Well*'s allegorical manner dramatizes the point in absolute terms. The difficulty of this love in practice, Zukofsky suggests, manifests itself in the crabbed style of this and other plays by Shakespeare presumably written around the same time (although Zukofsky tends to be sceptical of speculative scholarship concerning the supposed chronology of Shakespeare's works). The love of this play and what primarily concerns Zukofsky in *Bottom* is the principle of social

²⁰ The passage Zukofsky is referring to can be found in *Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres* (1959): 227.

²¹ See "A"-12.233.26-234.1, "A"-11.124.19 and *Bottom* 334; also Z-Notes commentary on "A"-11.

bonding, the possibility of community that requires mutual recognition, that we only realize ourselves in common.

While Zukofsky frequently enough declares love as his essential theme or impetus, he is not much interested in romantic love—sexuality and the erotic are largely absent from his work, which certainly sets him apart from Pound and Williams, or most of his contemporaries. While there is ample room for psycho-biographical speculation for those so inclined, we might consider this from a rhetorical perspective. Romantic love is of course ubiquitous in Shakespeare, or so it seems, yet Zukofsky indicates in the preface to *Bottom* that this is an erring blind love, as expressed by another Helena in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: “Love looks not with the eyes but with the mind, / And therefore is wing'd Cupid painted blind” (I.i.233-234; qtd. *Bottom* 10). This is “love” in love with the idea of love, blind Cupid, and thus Zukofsky’s argument for Shakespeare’s insistence on eyes that site themselves in the world and recognize others. In contrast with the solipsistic propensities of the former, love proper sees with others since the self only exists through others. Broadly speaking, Zukofsky prefers Shakespeare’s comedies and romances over the tragedies and histories; the former genres allowing for the proper dominance of the force of love, the communal and women, who so often have to instruct their male lovers out of their infatuation with their own ideas of love in order for them to actually see and love others. The comedies and romances end in images of community as opposed to the destruction of individuals in the tragedies, where individuals are destroyed because of their self-isolating individualism. Zukofsky is little interested in the complexities of psychological or character development, the inward speculation that is a bottomless pit because it cannot be seen. This disinterest in psychological depth is evident in his own play, *Arise, Arise*, and his later adaptation of Plautus in “A”-21. This is not a matter of everything being transparently in view, an absurd *idea* in any circumstances, but an insistence on knowing as always contingent, dynamically sited in the world and with others, rather than somehow lying invisible behind things. Poetry’s concern is with seeing as an enhanced sense of density and tactile contact, an affirmation of the necessary world—a seeing and affirmation that always necessarily implicates oneself with others. Almost invariably in Shakespeare it is women, often joined by the clowns, who see love and affirm others, while the males bang about in their heads.

As noted, Zukofsky seems little interested in romantic love as a singular event, as the intensification of the personal that rejects or rejects one out of the ordinary and routine. Nor do we find love as a force of poetic inspiration, nor his wife as a muse, even though he wrote a good many poems to her, including valentines. Invariably these poems express love as a sense of reciprocal mutuality and togetherness, as how one lives with and through another. This can and often has been read as simply low-frisson domestic poetry, which might be taken as a somewhat extreme consequence of a modernist aversion to melodramatic or sentimental gestures. However, these poems are not much about Zukofsky’s personal life but about enacting love as the poem. In this respect the first two poems of “Songs of Degrees,” “Hear, her / Clear...” (CSP 145-146), both designated valentines, are paradigmatic: the central image is of the beloved as mirror, but what is mirrored is not the self but his “error”—his lack or incompleteness. Then the second poem repeats the first poem five times, the same twelve words in the same order only altered slightly each time in lineation and punctuation. We should not doubt that these are love poems addressed to the poet’s wife, and quite

moving in their own peculiar manner. But the personal in any biographical or unique sense has been rendered of little importance as the poem seduces the reader to enact love by intimately eyeing and earing the words of the poem, in which the mirror or error (these two words asymmetrically reflecting each other) represents the site of the poem and reader in their endlessly reciprocal relationship. So these are not poems about love or the beloved so much as performative of love in the acts of reading.²²

If “A” is an epic (although I do not think Zukofsky ever called it that), then it is notable how after World War II the general focus is on the domestic and quotidian with a studious avoidance of the heroic, the argumentative or even the ambitious, other than the sheer scale and formal complexity of the poem. Rachel Blau DuPlessis once noted the “aggressive mastery” in the compulsiveness of the “A”’s formal diversity, particularly in the latter half, as if each movement needed to invent a whole new form.²³ However, one could just as easily turn this around: if one determines to write a long poem that inevitably will be read in the shadow of Pound and Williams, then this formal diversity functions in part to undermine any propensity toward a centered and assertive manner and is simply the logical extension of the emphasis on the multiplicity of the verbal rather than the anchoring tendencies of the semantic. The insistent formal diversity, then, is yet another indication of the rejection of an evolutionary narrative logic. This propensity in turn reflects the underlying collaborative orientation of the poem that I have argued for on a number of occasions, underwritten by the self-conscious principle that all writing is re-writing, so that the poetry strives to draw out its immensely sedimented nature, that is, its social being.²⁴ This is not merely a matter of language’s overdetermined history, but of the always present reciprocity of cultural work, its performative activity that necessarily implies a future, most specifically envisioned as readers.

The occasional allusions to Homer in “A” notably emphasize the familial and feminine sphere, not the exploits of Odysseus (see Z-Notes commentaries on “A”-12 and -15). The figure of the poet’s wife is often present but there is little effort to individualize her or for that matter the son either, much less to develop psycho-dramatic situations. Often her entrance into the poem serves to deflate the pretences or grumblings of the poet. In *Little*, while the father and son tend to dominate the foreground, the wife-mother is always present taking care of practicalities and trying to keep the male feet on the ground. This is to say, she makes possible the sphere within which the male artists can pursue their indulgences, all the while quietly pursuing her own artistic endeavours as musician and gardener. The happenstance of Celia’s name offered a range of irresistible puns: not only on the feminine principle of *seeing*, but also the initial C as the figure for the crescent moon (perhaps in contrast to the frequent allusions to the superpowers’ competition to fly there), or the *sea* enclosed by an embracing arm of land (e.g. “A”-12.183.2, 187.8, 213.26 and 22.535.30). That

²² For an excellent eyeing and earing of these poems as well as the larger sequence of which they are a part, see John Taggart, *Songs of Degrees: Essays on Contemporary Poetry and Poetics* (1994): 82-113.

²³ Rachel Blau DuPlessis, *Purple Passages: Pound, Eliot, Zukofsky, Olson, Creeley and the Ends of Patriarchal Poetry* (Iowa UP, 2012): 76. DuPlessis’ chapter on Zukofsky, primarily in relation to Pound, is one of the rare considerations of gender in Zukofsky’s work.

²⁴ On collaboration, see Z-Notes commentaries on “A”-17 and on “A”-24.

St. Cecelia is the patron saint of music and musicians is fortuitous as well. However, given the poetry's lack of mythopoetics, these never rise to the level of symbolism but remain readings of random inscriptions marking a personal sense of found presence.

That Zukofsky handed over the concluding movement of "A" to Celia's arrangement seems only appropriate, and that "A"-24 is a rearrangement of his own texts again highlights the fundamental assumption that writing is re-writing and that re-writing or reading is the surrendering of authorial autonomy to sociability (see Z-Notes commentary on "A"-24). It is not simply that Celia made the arrangement, but the resultant work itself, which is explicitly performative, seems designed to undermine any sense of willed authorial intent. Conceptually we can say to ourselves that "A"-24 forms a type of summa of Zukofsky's work, but if we actually read or, even better, hear it, we find ourselves in a dramatized babble with only the light emphasis of the Händel's "Harpichord Pieces" gesturing at some background sense of graspable order, language's desire to speak to all humankind.²⁵ At the end of "A"-12 (261) there is an exchange between the poet and his wife in the guise of Odysseus and Penelope, where the latter assures the poet that he can start anywhere and where he starts is with the rising of the son (sun). There are no wanderings of Odysseus here, whose assertion of selfhood required (as Zukofsky notes) the loss of all his men, other than those done at home among words in the presence of those one is closest to.

IV

The early importance of Adams might help explain how was it possible for Zukofsky to begin "A" with apparently little or no notion of a formal or thematic plan, allowing the semi-autonomous movements to accumulate their interrelations. While the genesis of "A" is a good deal more complicated than simply saying the poet proposed 24 parts that were then composed more or less individually (see Z-Notes commentary on the Forms of "A"), Zukofsky does seem to have had a temperamental resistance to the historical or mythic schemes that for the 19th and early 20th centuries were the sine qua non of meaningfulness and coherence itself. From our current perspective this does not necessarily pose a problem, but this was hardly thinkable in the late 1920s and virtually all modernist long poems and novels are underpinned by readings of history, often in the form of myths—a possible exception being Gertrude Stein, an early Zukofsky interest.²⁶ This was not in the least a rejection of history or the social but a resistance to the ossifying tendencies of narrative or rationalization, or perhaps more precisely to the dominance of the conception. Of course Zukofsky did begin "A" with the notion of a fugal or polyphonic structure, which in itself was hardly original as all manner of large-scale modernist works—novels as much as poems—had successfully deployed the formal idea of collage or montage. However, what is notable is Zukofsky's willingness to follow the implications and possibilities of the form

²⁵ There are recordings of two performances of "A"-24 available at PennSound: <http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Zukofsky.php>.

²⁶ However, "A"-12 quotes a reading of history Stein offers in "Composition as Explanation" to the effect that whereas previously it was sufficient to simply say things, with the 19th century came the felt need to explain everything—Adams' eternal "why"s—to which Zukofsky adds the characteristic observation that actually there has always been too much explaining ("A" 168-169).

itself, rather than thinking of it in terms of *Darstellung*, of the arrangement or representation of given arguments or themes.

Like *The Education*, “A” starts off in an autobiographical mode but not with the aim of recording experiences that will explain the poet as a general type, but rather seeking for an adequate form of the poem itself. This is not determined by its truthfulness to experience, subjective or historical, but by its capacity to acknowledge its reciprocal existence with others, which cannot be simply stated but must be performed in writing-reading. If in a sense Zukofsky himself emphasized the autobiographical as the thread running through “A” and all his work—“a poem of a life”—this had nothing to do with narrating the poet’s experiences.²⁷ Rather, the autobiographical is simply the ongoing forms registering an “awareness of order” (*Prep.* 8) found and created, which invariably bare the traces, indeed are the expression of the intersection of the personal and of history as the poet makes with the materials inherited and to hand. The autobiographical—which could just as readily be examined as the personal, the familial or the feminine—could be said to be not the cohering principle so much as the mark of the writing’s resistance to or critical dialogue with the tendency toward historical narrative or logic or standardized grammar. In no sense did Zukofsky conceive of this as a matter of freedom or of “the new”—history as the material, the social, mortality is inexorable. Yet history unanchored from determinative narratives is the place of possibility, whether this is conceived as the infinite rearrangement of the given or the latent and implied potential of any actuality. Yet such possibility or potential means nothing or simply remains non-recognizable except as shared, as what we do or can do with others.

I suggested at the outset that what Zukofsky took from Adams was a style of thought—what he termed a “valid scepticism” that “takes exception to all philosophies” (*Prep.* 167). This latter claim needs to be understood in the full Zukofskian-Adams manner, not as a simple dismissal of philosophy but an active inquisitiveness, the undertow of the poetic intellect that refuses to allow the concept to settle and entirely overmaster experiential particulars or to stunt the dynamic complexities inherent in an arrangement of words. As Adams put it: “For him, all opinion founded on fact must be error, because the facts can never be complete, and their relations must be always infinite” (*The Education* 410, qtd. “A”-8.82). This is one way to understand the critical function of Zukofsky’s interest in the idea of fugal or polyphonic forms, as foregrounding the figural form of propositional statements or of the semantic and so maintaining their interplay. For Zukofsky this involves a sensuous engagement with the visual and aural, as well as semantic, dimensions of the words that necessarily have an affirmative intention, to speak to and live with others. In this sense, Adams’ force of unity or attraction is axiomatic. But this is not conceived as some belief in an ultimate order out there or some definitive knowledge as Adams may seem to be seeking in *The Education*, but rather the recognition that all poetry or writing or reading or labor is

²⁷ In considering Zukofsky and the autobiographical, one might recall that he brought out an *Autobiography* (1970), which consists of a modest selection of short poems with musical setting by Celia. The selection was determined by Celia in the sense that it was the poems she chose to set, all done many years previous (mostly in the 1940s), that determined what was included. The poems are not presented in chronological order, and Zukofsky added a few very brief autobiographical remembrances that hardly add up to an explanatory narrative and for all we know could be quasi-made up.

only possible and is necessarily the expression of the activity of endeavouring to realize oneself with and through others.

9 July 2016