

## “The design / Of the fugue”: “A” 1-7

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A prefatory note: Hopefully the reasons for discussing the early movements of “A” as a group rather than in individual commentaries will be made obvious in what follows (although “A”-4 has been addressed in its own commentary). Nonetheless, after various contextual considerations, I focus in detail on the individual movements in sequence, so readers with limited interest or patience can jump to my remarks on this or that early movement if they prefer. My hope is that if they do so, they will find that unlike the subsequent movements, which tend to be more or less self-contained, these early movement were conceived in an interconnected manner.

I

Pound began *The Cantos* with a false start, three monologic cantos that worry over the problem of an adequate form for a long poem in the present. After some extended mulling of the relevant issues and materials, these so-called *Ur-Cantos* culminate in the famous multi-layered translation from Book XI of the *Odyssey* with which *The Cantos* now begins. It is as if Pound needed to poetically work through the initial questions, but once digested he cast aside these preliminary ramblings and launched directly into his poem. Few would argue against this bit of self-editing. A parallel can be drawn with the early movements of Zukofsky’s “A”, in which the first six are predominately concerned with the question of an adequate form for the poem at hand, which then is abruptly realized with “A”-7—commonly recognized as the first distinctly Zukofskian work. But characteristically Zukofsky chose not to throw out these early movements as disposable warmups, and one could debate whether in the long run that was an advantageous decision, or non-decision. While many readers have been attracted by the opening evocation of Bach’s *St. Matthew Passion*, one might argue that beginning with “A”-7 would be a more effective initiation into the demands and poetics of the overall poem—rather than the emphasis on music and a loosely stream-of-consciousness presentation, we would have an emphasis on dynamic artifice and construction.

No admirer of “A” is likely to make great claims for the first six movements, although perhaps their more familiar modernist manner can be seen as an appropriate run-in to the greater demands of the subsequent sections. Nevertheless, the first seven movements are unique in that they were composed as a set with clear dialogic interconnections and some sense of development, whereas thereafter individual movements are conceived and composed autonomously. Furthermore, this set is predominately meta-poetic, concerned with the expectations and demands of a poetry for the present, and therefore have a special interest given how chary Zukofsky was in explaining his intentions. Judging from the critical evidence, the “Objectivist” essays that have usually been taken as defining his poetics have been more befuddling than helpful. As one would expect, these early movements do not provide a running commentary or argument about the poem but rather incorporate a self-reflexive dimension throughout. This, I will argue, is integral to Zukofsky’s fugal conception of his poem, which does not depend primarily on thematic development or mythopoetic underpinnings but on formal dynamism.

The structural design of “A” is such that reading the poem from the beginning is not necessarily the best approach, or at least not the necessary approach. While from the outset Zukofsky recognized that the poem needed to maintain sufficient openness to allow its own development to determine and alter (complicate) its progress, particularly in the latter half he came to the point of resisting all overriding formal conceptions. It is arguable that there is little that compels the reader of “A” to take it as a whole or a sequence, rather than as a compendium of diverse poems, individually of more or less interest, that can be read in any

order. This is probably how most read *The Cantos* or *The Maximus Poems* with only a certain species of reader required to account for the full sequences and the logic of their continuity. However, Zukofsky's composition of the various movements under the aspect of a single work and their sequencing, largely chronological, throws up all manner of possible interrelations, the diversity and even unevenness of its parts rubbing up against each other. At the same time it is equally plausible to read "A" spatially, where any given movement is set in relation to any other. Late in the poem, Zukofsky will offer the formal conception, via Wittgenstein, of crisscrossing, an open and dynamic complex of interrelations without center, teleology or edges (560), and by this time he had a strong sense of the aleatoric process of the poem's composition and its reading afterlife.<sup>1</sup>

Since inevitably "A" has been commonly read as descendent from *The Cantos*, it is useful to draw out some basic differences between these poems, recognizing that often these differences are Zukofsky's conscious determination to write against Pound. Zukofsky insisted, perhaps too insistently, that he had not read *The Cantos* when he began on "A". One has to be careful as to what this might mean. By his own account, he had read the *Ur-Cantos*, without being especially impressed, and a few of the early *Cantos*, but not the collected volumes, whose earliest editions were pricey small press productions beyond Zukofsky's means. However, this would only have been the case for the first four movements of "A", since in 1929 he wrote at Pound's urging a long article on *The Cantos*, so that by the time he composed "A"-5 and -6 he was familiar with the sequence through Canto 27.<sup>2</sup> If we accept Zukofsky's account, then his point is that he had little idea of Pound's larger intentions, both thematically and formally, when he began on his own long poem. This does not rule out the influence of Pound's general method, loosely collagist, on Zukofsky's own practice, although the latter would point out that as far as this goes, such methods were "in the air" across the arts by this time (*Prep.* 135).

Zukofsky rarely refers to "A" as an epic, and there are no grandiose allusions to Homer as in the case of Pound.<sup>3</sup> There is a passing reference to epos in "A"-2 accompanied by mentions of Agamemnon and Greeks looting, specifically carrying off women, which is an appropriate epitome of Zukofsky's view of the heroic epic tradition. An assiduous reader of classic texts, he was not in the least disinterested in Homer, but judging from his scattered allusions to or adaptations from Homer, he emphasizes the poems as anti-heroic condemnations of masculine violence, often noting the treatment of women and emphasizing the domestic scenes (most notably, see the end of "A"-15). He has no interest in Odysseus as

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<sup>1</sup> For more on the structural designs of "A", see Z-notes commentary on the Forms of "A".

<sup>2</sup> This is the point *The Cantos* had reached in the first two book publications of 1925 and 1928 by Three Mountains Press and John Rodker respectively, and these are what Zukofsky outlines in his Pound essay (*Prep.* 73-75). The next three cantos were published in *Hound & Horn* in 1930, the same year as *A Draft of XXX Cantos*, after Zukofsky completed his essay. In a 30 Dec. 1930 letter to Pound, Zukofsky gives a quite precise account of what he had read of *The Cantos* when he began on "A": the *Ur-Cantos* included in *Lustra* (1916) and *Cantos* 4-7 in *Poems 1918-21* (1921), all except the last of these in earlier versions subsequently revised (Zukofsky does not mention Canto 7 but it is included in the volume) (*EP/LZ* 78-79). Zukofsky offers further substantial remarks on "A" in another letter to Pound dated 7 Dec. 1931 (*EP/LZ* 110-113). Although Zukofsky dates "A"-4 as 1928 in the table of contents of "A", on the surviving typescript it is dated 11 July 1929, which would have been while or immediately before working on the Pound essay, which was completed 10 Aug. 1929.

<sup>3</sup> An exception is in "'Recencies' in Poetry" (1931) where he speaks of epic in quite obscure terms, but apparently is attempting to recover a sense that is not determined by specific content but by "complexity" and the poetic (musical) treatment of "facts," which seems to mean the social without saying so. As contemporary examples, Zukofsky includes "A", as well as *The Waste Land* and *The Cantos*, but also "Poem beginning 'The'" and Williams' "It is a living coral" and "The pure products of American go crazy" (*Prep.* 213-214).

a figure for “modern man,” much less for the poet himself, except in mocking terms (e.g. end of “A”-12). Indeed, Zukofsky eschewed the pervasive modernist projection of the artist as cultural symptom, taking on the sufferings of a failed society and the burden of history in order to call on readers to change themselves or else . . . .<sup>4</sup> Pound’s opening gambit identifying himself and his poem with the Homeric tradition reaches back even further to anthropology, to myth and ritual as archetypal cultural patterns. This too Zukofsky avoids and the rejection of mythopoetics has sometimes been taken as a defining characteristic of the so-called “Objectivist” poetry generally. This aspect of Pound’s poem is inextricable from the centrality of history and his famous definition of epic as a “poem including history.” So at the outset Odysseus must consult the past for clues to the future on the assumption that past patterns hold the key to the contemporary redemption—the past as a repository of wisdom and exemplary paradigms that need to be renewed or made new in the present. “A” is little interested in history and offers no historical interpretations or arguments. One has to immediately qualify this claim in the case of “A”-8, the most Poundian movement of “A” and obviously written to a significant degree in conscious reaction to *The Cantos*. This is not the place to elaborate on the specifics of “A”-8 vis-à-vis *The Cantos*, and I will merely point out that “A”-8 is, like most of the movements of “A”, self-contained, and its historical-political concerns are neither anticipated by what precedes it nor continued in what follows. Although this can and has been explained by the vagaries of history, the point to keep in mind is that “A” never required this sort of thematic or argumentative continuity. This implies a view that history is not a repository of exemplary lessons, unless they are on the order of that offered in “A”-10 and -15, the perpetual violence of history and the victimization of the innocent, particularly children and women. The materials of history do not offer useful paradigms that simply need to be given modern dress or interpretation, rather they are literally what we are and live with, that with which we necessarily go about the business of activity making our lives. Eliot once famously observed that dead writers are that which we know, but I would suggest that for Zukofsky this needs to be given a Viconian twist: that which we know is what we make of dead writers. In any case, “A”-8 remains a large Poundian chunk floating within the larger poem alongside a good many other large (and some small) chunks suggesting any number of relations without defining the dominate mode of the overall work. That is, it cannot be taken as typical, and outside of “A”-8 there is almost no use of historical documents or presentation of a historical argument (as always there is the apparent exception, i.e. “A”-15; see Z-note commentary). “A”’s largeness is not an effort at comprehensiveness because it is based on assumptions or practices that reject the legitimacy of such totalization.

While the above differences from Pound have significant ethical and political implications, they remain largely matters of content and its motivation. More fundamental is Zukofsky’s handling of textual materials, the view that with language use there is no intrinsically true, correct or superior method but instead discourses always play off each other, and this forms the basis of his fugal conception for his poem. From the outset “A” requires an attention to the interweaving of and distinctions between textual matter more than to content matter, or rather the latter tends to follow from the former. The habit of applying Poundian assumptions by which we need to evaluate each textual piece will only lead to problems with “A”. This relates directly to another important difference, Zukofsky’s general disinterest in allusion. In “Poem beginning ‘The’” he demonstrated that he could pull off the razzle-dazzle of multiple literary allusions and pastiche while at the same time mocking it, so it is all the more notable that he promptly drops this manner. Particularly after “A”-7,

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<sup>4</sup> Delmore Schwartz’s famous 1945 essay on T.S. Eliot as “international hero” might be taken as emblematic, not least given the evident consequences on Schwartz himself.

virtually every line of “A” is worked in some way from prior texts, but it is rarely important to identify those texts, however interesting or suggestive their identification may be for the inquisitive. For Pound or Eliot, allusion is fundamental to their method: the identification and recovery of the prior texts, which lend authority or are being written against (e.g. ironically), structure the “historical sense” and evaluative framework of their poems. Any serious reader of *The Cantos* must train themselves in at least the basics of Pound’s canon and his critical attitudes in order to properly read the barrage of quotations and references, and adjudicate whether they ventriloquize the poet’s views or their antitheses, or are to be read ironically. Of course there are other ways to read *The Cantos*, and some of us strenuously learn to be serious readers only to realize this may not be the most satisfactory way to read the poem. Nevertheless the thrones of judgment preside over Pound’s intentions for his poem. Such allusions play a minute role in “A”, even though academic habits find that unnerving. We need to listen to the texture of the pieces as they play off other textures, and this is what I will attempt in the readings of the early movements below.

## II

When Zukofsky began “A” in 1928, the modernist long poem hardly existed in English, and the question of structural coherence was paramount. There was a healthy appetite for long poems at the time, but “successful” examples were narratives: Edwin Arlington Robinson’s *Tristram* was not only the Pulitzer Prize winner the year Zukofsky began “A” but also a best-seller,<sup>5</sup> or the next year’s winner, Stephen Vincent Benét’s *John Brown’s Body*, or the long poems of Robinson Jeffers that caused a sensation from the mid-1920s, or Archibald MacLeish’s *Conquistador* (1933), another Pulitzer Prize winner once considered a major modernist work. When Zukofsky began “A”, however, there were only three formally useful precedents: *The Waste Land*, *The Cantos* and *Ulysses*—although there were also early examples of the serial poem, most notably Mina Loy’s “Songs to Johannes,” in Alfred Kreymborg’s *Others*. When Pound finished pruning and shaping *The Waste Land* manuscript, its author was nervous enough about its structural coherence to invent ad hoc a couple of influential explanations. First there is the claim that the entire poem takes place in a single, observing consciousness (the same consciousness as the figure presiding over the Homeric rituals of Canto I)—whether one understands Tiresias as representing the classic modernist idea that the real is experiential and therefore internal, which is boundless, or as some supra-consciousness able to encompass yet transcend the fallen episodes and fragmented presentation of the poem, an asceticism (aestheticism?) that has left behind the desire suffered by those in the poem. Secondly, Eliot came up with the “mythical method” as a motivation for the coherence of *Ulysses*, although even more avidly applied to *The Waste Land* itself with the help of the anthropological references in its notes. As mentioned, Zukofsky eschews mythopoetics or any attempt to ground the long work in some supposed archetypal pattern of culture or history. Some might attribute this to his early Marxism, although it is notable that Zukofsky was equally resistant to Marxist mythopoetics—specifically to the dialectical materialist reading of history, which would have instantly disqualified him as a proper Marxist in the eyes of most Marxists at that time. More plausible would be the early intellectual influence of Henry Adams, so skeptical of finding an explanation for history (the constant failure of his “education”) other than the compulsive search itself for such answers. An argument could be made that *Ulysses* was the most pertinent model for “A” at the time, a

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<sup>5</sup> Since I happen to own an old copy of this poem published by Macmillan, I cannot resist giving the information on the copyright page: “Published 1927. Reprinted April, 1927; May, 1927, four times; June, 1927, three times; July, 1927, twice; August, 1927; September, 1927. October, 1927, twice.” Apparently over 57,000 copies of this 200 page poem were sold within the first year of publication.

work in which the “mythical method” Zukofsky would have recognized as a mere scaffolding to help get the job done and in no way a plausible motivation for its structural coherence, while on the other hand it was unmindful of stylistic consistency as it relentlessly remade itself. In the opening paragraph of “American Poetry 1920-1930,” Zukofsky suggests that “the brain and conscience of Joyce are that of his literary generation” (*Prep.* 137).<sup>6</sup> Of course Joyce’s display of erudition went a long way to convincing even skeptical readers that somehow his novel hung together. While the relative autonomy of the individual chapters of *Ulysses*, particularly as the work proceeds, makes it the most obvious model for a major aspect of what “A” will become, this is less clearly the case for the early movements we will be examining here.<sup>7</sup>

Another possible model worth mentioning, although it is not usually thought of as a long poem, is Williams’ *Spring and All* (1923). Apparently Williams gave a copy to Zukofsky at or immediately after their first meeting in April 1928, which the latter promptly recognized as a major work—in “Sincerity and Objectification” he claims the volume might serve as the equivalent of Wordsworth’s “Preface” for a new century of American writing (*Prep.* 198, “A” 378).<sup>8</sup> While formally *Spring and All* did not leave an obvious mark on the early movements of “A”, I would suggest its challenge did. The combination of prose and poetry, the discursive and the lyrical, the subjective and the critical, as well as the improvisational method laid out the challenges and possibilities of the new poetry, that is, free verse as a rethinking of the poetic itself. In the early movements of “A”, Zukofsky is considering the implications of free verse for the long poem. The problem is not primarily thematic or simply incorporating, say, contemporary urban materials, but formal. Not surprisingly the period of composition, 1928-1930, was coterminous with his most intense writing of critical prose assessing contemporary American poetry: a long essay on *The Cantos*, “Sincerity and Objectification,” “American Poetry 1920-1930,” and two pieces on Williams, one incorporated as the conclusion to the critical survey of American poetry and the other as a postscript to the *Hound & Horn* publication of “Henry Adams.”<sup>9</sup> In “American Poetry 1920-1930,” Zukofsky evaluated the poets of his time primarily on the degree to

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<sup>6</sup> This is the opening sentence of the essay in *Prepositions*, but originally it was more complexly embedded in the middle of the opening paragraph. See *The Symposium* 2.1 (Jan. 1931): 60.

<sup>7</sup> Another possible formal model I will not pursue here is E.E. Cummings’ play *Him*, of which Zukofsky thought highly and which combines a range of distinct styles or dramatic modes, much to the confusion of most initial viewers. See Zukofsky review, “*Him*” (*Prep.* 84-85) and a footnote in the original version of his essay on Pound’s *Cantos* in which he places *Him* alongside *The Cantos* and *The Waste Land* as successful contemporary presentations of, rather than rumination on, thought and character (“The Cantos of Ezra Pound,” *The Criterion* 10:40 (April 1931): 428).

<sup>8</sup> At Pound’s instigation, Zukofsky contacted Williams and they first met 1 April 1928. On 5 April Zukofsky attended the performance of Bach’s *St. Matthew Passion*, at which Williams apparently hoped to join him but was unable to make it into the city. According to Celia Zukofsky, it was Zukofsky’s subsequent description of the performance sent to Williams that was the start of “A”-1, although if this is so his letter has not survived, as is the case for most of his side of the early period of their correspondence (Celia Zukofsky, et. al., “A Commemorative Evening for Louis Zukofsky,” *American Poetry Review* 9.1 (1980): 25). By mid-April Williams thanks Zukofsky for his response to *Spring and All* (*WCW/LZ* 3-6). By May Williams entrusted Zukofsky with editing *The Descent of Winter* manuscript, perhaps more or less when he began on “A”-1.

<sup>9</sup> Originally titled “Beginning again with William Carlos Williams,” this postscript, in its revised form, appeared in *Prepositions* as the third of the three separate pieces gathered together under the title “William Carlos Williams” (*Prep.* 51-53). Aside from a handful of reviews (some of them unpublished), Zukofsky refrained from critical writing on contemporary poetry after “‘Recencies’ in Poetry” (Aug. 1931)—the only meaningful exceptions being two short tributes to Williams in 1948 and 1958 (*Prep.* 45-51).

which they had or had not thrown off the ghost of meter and other conventional poeticisms. This was not a dogmatically symptomatic reading of who was or was not sufficiently up-to-date—Zukofsky was always a diligent student of traditional forms and would deploy them in some of his best known poems. But free verse meant that one must shake the automated habit of metrical and generic regularity in order to hear the other manifold rhythmical possibilities in the language, beginning as baseline with the colloquial but from there opening up to the “poetic” possibilities in any textual or spoken materials and their juxtapositions. At stake is the reconceptualization of the “poetic” and its possibilities, which can encompass the full range of prose discourses, the colloquial, visual possibilities of the page and so on. His well-known, much later statement of poetics as “an integral / lower limit speech / upper limit music” (“A” 138) simply embraces all utterances and the integral can be plotted anywhere on the graph relative to all other utterances. As I have argued elsewhere, in the process of rethinking the poetic, Williams was crucial to Zukofsky, as well as in defining his differences from and resistance to Pound (see Z-notes commentaries on Zukofsky, Williams and Pound and also on “A”-17).

### III

Looking more closely at the structural and thematic concerns of the early movements of “A”, it is necessary to begin with a textual note. Much of Zukofsky’s early work, particularly that of the 1930s which has received most critical attention, was substantially revised. All the first eight movements of “A”, as well as all the essays from this period were edited for their much later book publications. Zukofsky went through the first seven movements of “A” in the summer of 1942 (although in the case of “A”-7 he only adjusted some punctuation). These revisions consist primarily of deletions and by my rough count, close to 200 lines were cut out from the first six movements, which does not take into account the many dozens of eliminated words and phrases scattered throughout. The end result is probably better poetry, but at the sacrifice of a degree of colloquialism and the personal, and overall the revised version is decidedly a more decorous presentation. Furthermore many of the more overt structural elements have been significantly reduced or erased altogether. Since my discussion is historical, concerned to discern Zukofsky’s early intentions, I will be referring to and quoting the original text as printed in *An “Objectivists” Anthology* (1932), where the full set of the first seven movements was published. I will note significant differences between the texts, although this is not the place for a comprehensive examination of Zukofsky’s revisions.<sup>10</sup>

When Zukofsky published “A” 1-7 in *An “Objectivists” Anthology*, he highlighted the larger structure or progression by pairing the first six and giving each pair a title (quoted snippets): “Come, ye Daughters,” “Out of the voices,” “And I:” respectively, with “A”-7 given the title, “There are different techniques.” As such these sub-titles are not particularly enlightening, but the pairings draw out the fact the first and third pairs (“A” 1-2 + 5-6) form a continuous sequence, the two pairs overtly linked since “A”-2 and -5 are both framed as debates between the poet and “Kay” addressing the appropriate form for the poem. The overall sequence begins with a subjective experience of a public event and concludes in the

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<sup>10</sup> My in-text references will indicate both the *An “Objectivists” Anthology* and standard “A” text pages (e.g. 120/8), and where there is a single reference, the relevant text has been deleted in revision. Whenever it is useful to be more precise about a reference, I use the following form: movement.page.line, e.g. 3.10.18 = “A”-3, page 10, line 18. For all textual variants and revisions, see the Textual Notes on the Z-site. Anyone working from the *An “Objectivists” Anthology* text should be aware that there are a number of errors, including a couple of missing lines, noted on an Errata page inserted into copies of the *Anthology*. A transcription of these Errata can also be found on the Textual Notes page of the Z-site.

latter part of “A”-6 with the poet travelling cross-country, taking in larger vistas and materials that the poet and the poem need to account for. “A”-3 and -4 fold out in different directions and their focus is on the personal, a highly subjective lyric in the form of an elegy for the poet’s friend Ricky and a more objectively presented consideration of the poet’s Jewish-Yiddish heritage. Simply as sketched one can begin to note various structural continuities and differences, a rudimentary fugal form. So when the question is posed at the end of “A”-6 as to adapting the design of the fugue to poetry, or more precisely to this poem, the poem has already been embodying or at least trying out fugal possibilities—in the dialog with Kay, in the alternation of the pairs of movements or the differences within pairs, in the shifts between the personal or aesthetic and the social, and there are other fugal possibilities we will get to. At the same time the answer to “A”-6’s question is “A”-7, formally distinct from anything that has preceded and which enacts a fugal combination of traditional formal rigor with the primary impetus of free verse, that is, the entrance into poetry of vernacular rhythms, diction and subject matter. Glancing ahead, with the completion of “A”-7 in 1930 Zukofsky will take a break from the poem, and with “A”-8 (begun in 1935) the poem will set off in yet another direction, at least conceptually, although in terms of subject matter it develops at length certain suggestions in the early movements.

Zukofsky made some efforts to thread these early movements together. Most obviously, he repeats lines and phrases from Bach’s libretto in each of the movements through “A”-7, indicated by being set in italics.<sup>11</sup> Sometimes these brief quotations clearly punctuate or comment on the context where they appear but not always, and overall they are too sparse to be very intrusive. However, as the sequence proceeds there is quite a bit of recursive images and phrases throughout, small linkages between the individual movements, which obviously enough is one way to imagine a fugal poetic form. Quite a bit of this repetition was edited out when Zukofsky revised the early movements in 1942. This recursive manner has been noticed by some, especially in “A”-7, but the point here is that Zukofsky clearly fed these in throughout and I will focus on them in the following commentary. In his later thinking on this matter, his preferred term will be “recurrences,” but it is evident that this was a fundamental structural principle from the outset. Of course *The Cantos* also adopt a similar structural principle, the “repeat,” but for Pound these are primarily a matter of history, the attempt to identify recurring patterns or moments in history as a definition of social human nature, which must be deployed as a reliable basis for a redeemed society—human truths revealed by the repeats of history. Zukofsky’s repeats are located in textual matter (which of course may be “history”) and the necessity that all writing is rewriting. This is one way to interpret Canto I, but Pound was prone to be caught up in the story or mythopoetics, rather than the essential act that writing is. Clearly early on Zukofsky felt it was necessary to consciously work in these repeats as one manner of realizing a fugal form, but they cannot be accounted for thematically, that is, they are not simply a matter of twinning together a number of different themes or topics, although that has been a common assumption as to what Zukofsky is doing (particularly in “A”-8 and -12). The trouble is no one has very convincingly demonstrated such a thematic fugal structure, the bonding of thematic threads running throughout. Also a high percentage of the repeats in these early movements are quite low frequency.

Later on Zukofsky came to trust that the repeats would take care of themselves. This is one sense in which he suggested “A” was a “poem of a life” since it will inevitably manifest the concerns and even tics of the author, although whether “life” means primarily the individual or the times in which that individual lived is left characteristically open—the

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<sup>11</sup> In *An “Objectivists” Anthology* and at least some of the early printings of individual movements in journals, Zukofsky drew attention to this detail in a footnote or the contributor’s note.

fugal dynamic of inside and outside or part and whole remains in play.<sup>12</sup> Horses, to take perhaps the best known repeat in the poem, becomes a structural binding, without however being semantically consistent. Sometimes horses can be understood as an allegory for the poet or the poem, but very often not. One of the earliest appearances of horses is as a carousel at the beginning of “A”-4, suggesting recurrence itself, among other possibilities. Often, especially in the later movements, the word “horse” becomes simply an index, a means of selecting textual materials to be worked into the poem.<sup>13</sup> Yet for Zukofsky these apparently disconnected “horses” all have structural functions. However, one point this indicates, especially as Zukofsky proceeds with his poem, is his trust that readers will find orders, recurrences in their act of engaging with the text. The poet’s responsibility is not to instruct them, to tell them what they already know or else will never know, but to offer a text of sufficient interest and intricacy so as to engage the reader’s participation. Which means that the emphasis is on the immediate arrangement of the particulars, rather than neat overriding frameworks, in which repeats will inevitably and persistently crop up—we will find them if we want to, that is what reading does. So “A” will be presented as the work of an author who will live as whatever its readers make of the poem. It is notable that for all the autobiographical material included in “A” there is a decided lack of personality, of any clear impression of just what sort of character the poet is—particularly compared with his contemporaries. In the end, Zukofsky will turn over the final movement to his wife or to her re-assembly or re-reading of his texts, and in so doing overtly undermine any sense that we can expect to identify an authoritative author behind the whole of “A”. Indeed, particularly if one listens to “A”-24 as performed, as the text seems to demand, one might be inclined to conclude that the voice(s) of the poet has been deliberately dissolved into babble.<sup>14</sup>

Zukofsky suggested to Pound that the seed of “A” was a specific line in “Poem beginning ‘The’” that is ascribed to Bach in the poem’s notes (*EP/LZ* 79).<sup>15</sup> Again, we must be careful in parsing such retrospective remarks. Zukofsky liked to interlink his works, but this does not entail that there is a neat evolutionary development of either certain themes or of formal progression. We might keep in mind the crisscross model. A certain line is taken out of a larger work not because it is especially significant compared with any number of other lines but simply as a starting point for a new work—one can start anywhere and everything

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<sup>12</sup> Zukofsky added the subtitle “a poem of a life” in a 1967 reprint of “A” 1-12, but he did not use it in subsequent volumes of the poem nor its complete edition. The 1967 edition also includes a forward with a quotation from “*It was*” that might be taken as a gloss on the sense of “life” (*Prep.* 227-228).

<sup>13</sup> For examples see the Z-notes commentaries on “A”-13 and -14. The index that Zukofsky, or for the most part his wife Celia, added to “A” functions similarly. It is keyed to the recurrences of given words (mostly substantives) to indicate not their signifying stability but their variability across textual contexts while gesturing at possible relations between their iterations, by no means limited to whatever the poet might have intended. This is to say the index is not cleverly selected as a clue to readers as to a proper reading of the poem but a random guide to unanticipated readings—where does a reader start and end in using an index?

<sup>14</sup> Two performances of “A”-24 can be heard on the PennSound website. See also Z-notes commentary on “A”-24.

<sup>15</sup> Specifically line 309: “Our God immortal such Life as is our God,” which has a curiously complicated background. The notes to “Poem beginning ‘The’” ascribe this line not only to Bach but also to “Myself,” and the specific rendering here is from an early uncollected poem, “For a Thing by Bach,” composed in 1926 and published in *Pagany* in 1930. This odd poem is presumably a free adaptation or imitation in Biblical manner of the text of a Bach cantata. Given his Yiddish upbringing, Zukofsky would have been able to make his way through the German text without much difficulty (however, when using the *St. Matthew Passion* libretto in “A”, Zukofsky clearly worked from a standard translation). There is a passage in “A”-18 in which the older Zukofsky is thinking back over his poetic beginnings and quotes snippets from this poem (391).

relates. We might evoke here another remark of Wittgenstein's of which Zukofsky was fond: "A point in space is place for an argument" (see "A"-13.287.37-288.3 and *Bottom* 46, 47). Decades later, Zukofsky pulled out a silly enough looking line from "A"-13—"An orange our sun—the pea, wee wee" (280)—which became, several years later, the beginning of "A"-14: the first four words became the first four lines, the dash filled in with various word play until coming around to the implausible pea and peeing at the end of the opening prelude (314-315). This is simply to point out another instance of Zukofsky's textual and playful constructedness as opposed to the usual assumption that big modernist works are attempting to thematically solve the world's problems.

The simplest way to read the early movements of "A" is as a type of bildungsroman pattern, and thus following directly from "Poem beginning 'The,'" which clearly is how Zukofsky thought about it. Thus we begin with the young poet at a performance of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*, with its effect representing an aesthetic ideal which the following movements attempt to adapt for the purposes of a major poem and for the present times, and all of this culminates in an initial realization as "A"-7. Fundamental to this progression is a movement from a more subjective position to one that adequately accounts for the social, and arguably the most central concern is how to move beyond the singular lyric voice to encompass the other—thus the formal centrality of the *St. Matthew Passion* with its double chorus. To a significance degree modernism generally can be seen in these terms with all its formal experiments with multiple voices and stream-of-consciousness wherein the babble of the outside breaks down the insulation of the individual consciousness, or with simultaneity and capturing the contingent complexities of the urban, and so on. Zukofsky opened "Poem beginning 'The'" by critiquing and mocking the wasteland or "end of the world" propensities of much of the modernism he so clearly wanted to emulate. This was more than a mere criticism of attitude because it tends to reinforce the atomization of individuals however much the works may acknowledge multiplicities. The conclusion of "Poem beginning 'The'" somewhat grandly addresses the Sun, "our Comrade," to include "myriad upon myriad" (*CSP* 19-20). This is not the most convincing part of the poem even though Zukofsky may be mocking his own youthful pretensions with such rhetorical extravagance. But as Zukofsky indicated to Pound, "A" was meant to "make good" on the promise of this conclusion (*EP/LZ* 78-80). As far as Zukofsky was concerned, however, this could not simply be a matter of including multiple or other voices, which, as the elder modernists had already demonstrated, did not necessarily solve the larger problem of conveying a sense of sociability, the sense of commonality intrinsic to any utterance as an act.

"A"-1

"A"-1 has a sketchy narrative structure readable within the terms laid out by the modernist fiction of Joyce or Woolf. The poet attends a performance of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* at Carnegie Hall, after which he wanders the streets before heading home on the subway very early in the morning; the next day he wakes up and there is some reflective reaction to the preceding night. All of this is conveyed as a combination of internal thoughts or memories with external perceptions, often difficult to untangle, but the space of the page is readily frameable by the consciousness of the individual poet.

The affective experience of Bach's *Passion* motivates and challenges the poet to consider how he can create an analogous work for his own times and medium. A few pages in, the poet under the spell of the performance offers a utopian lyrical passage—the streets have become frictionless so that it is as if walking with feet off the ground, effortless and leaving mortality behind (115-116/4). This defines a conventional enough aesthetic ideal, a moment of felt perfection, with thinly disguised socio-political implications because of course there always is friction. Relative well-being, whether subjective or social, correlates

with a sense of non-obstruction in a situation where everything necessarily impinges on everything else. This is generally Spinozian, as I will detail later in examining a parallel passage in “A”-6. For now we note that this moment gives way to the only passage in this movement explicitly expressing the poet’s interest in composing his own work. Despite the evidence of the poem at hand, the poet claims he does not feel an urgent need to write but calls up several notes or quotations presumably as possible guides. In the original text, Zukofsky is somewhat more explicit as to the authors of these quotes—Pound, Williams and Cummings respectively—the three poets of most importance to him at the time.<sup>16</sup> These quotations hardly add up to a coherent plan or set of poetic ideals, and they represent the poet’s uncertain direction—an acknowledgement of his allegiances (firmly with the innovative trajectory of contemporary American poetry) without a clear sense of how he will find his own way in their wake. The Pound quotation indicates a commitment both to formal innovation and a recognition of the problem of translating techniques from one medium to another, since how to transpose musical form to poetry is a key question of the early movements. The Williams and Cummings quotations appear to raise the problem of contact with others, that quintessential problem of modernity, the sense of alienation—or as the poet puts it in “A”-6, “tiredness between people” (133/21). The Cummings quotation, taken from the play *Him*, is of particular interest because it defines a phenomenological ideal: “Everything which / We really are and never quite live” (116/4). This is a variant of an aesthetic principle that Zukofsky held throughout his life, that art like all human activity is the endeavor for a maximal sense of existence—Stein’s “completely living” or Williams’ active imagination. Necessarily this involves the recognition of limitations, of what inhibits such existence, which is above all the social both as defining the possible and the obstructions to its realization. Yet those limits also indicate potential, what might be, or an expansive sense of the self as entangled with others and the outside beyond any narrow conception of the ego. It is worth giving the passage from Zukofsky’s review of *Him* in which this quotation appears (without however indicating it is a quotation): “Mr. Cummings is not merely the perfect acrobat or the genius carefully, yet easily and very skillfully inhabiting everything which we really are and everything which we never quite live. His intention is not not to be serious, but to be very serious and to get away with it. In *Him*, Mr. Cummings while aware that an artist, a man, a failure must proceed is also aware of himself and his struggle in the social milieu” (*Prep.* 85).<sup>17</sup> Zukofsky’s take on Cummings looks forward to his mid-1930s essay on Charlie Chaplin (*Prep.* 57-64) and the idea of being in the density of other bodies, out of which one of necessity creates an existence, a realization of oneself, whether called art or labor or simply living. Such activity is inherently a social critique, a resistance to or remaking of felt obstructions or limitations on one’s “free” existence. Humor and absurdism, in other words being “very serious,” are always for Zukofsky essential to this activity.

After this brief catalog of tutelary quotations, the poet is on the subway very early in the morning, presumably on the way home, the trainman calls out the stations and then we get several lines from Bach’s libretto mentioning sleeping, broken bodies. We have here one of those inevitable subway evocations of the underworld (later picked up by Hart Crane and T.S. Eliot among the better known examples), suggesting the world of spiritual death—the “broken bodies” also recalling less metaphorically the previous mention of miners out on

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<sup>16</sup> The names given in the original text are Atheling (the pseudonym Pound used for his music criticism, a selection of which was included in *Antheil with a Treatise on Music* (1927)), Carlos and Estlang, which seems to be a misspelling or mishearing for Estlin (Edward Estlin Cummings).

<sup>17</sup> This passage is unrevised in the later text, except for the double “not” in the second sentence, although curiously this does not alter the intended meaning. The single “not” of the original version strikes me as preferable.

strike and the poet's glimpse of a street bum as he exits the concert hall, as well as resonating with the unemployed and "chain gangs" that will follow. But invariably such sleeping death suggests an entire state of society, "tiredness between people," registered here as something the poet's work must write against—the problem and the opportunity—which anticipates the apocalyptic concluding lines of the movement, also quoted from Bach's libretto.<sup>18</sup> I have stressed these passages—the utopian lyric, the evocation of the poet's mentors and the late night subway ride—because the movement as a whole pivots around this cluster: the poet's experiential sense of an aesthetic and social ideal, his poetic inheritance and the fallen world in and against which he necessarily writes. Initially, the aesthetic ideal of the musical performance as an effect tends toward the transcendent, which is literalized in the utopian lyric, and although the various details of the fallen world filter in, they remain at arm's length and measured (often satirically) against this ideal. Thus the reversal the next morning as the effect inevitably evaporates. It is the burden of the movements that follow to overcome this irreconcilable gap, to situate the aesthetic firmly in the world rather than over against it.

In the pages that precede these passages, we have the poet at the concert and then exiting out into the streets where we get a montage of sights and thoughts that touch on various topics that presumably his work needs to take into account. The poet's exit from the concert hall is quasi-surreal and strikes definite infernal notes (this is even stronger in the original version), and indeed what he sees and overhears outside are a degraded world: a tramp, the superficial chatter of other concert goers, on a side street supporters of miners on lockout, and interpolated some sardonic observations on popular conventional poets. Running throughout is an awareness of class. Somewhat oddly the opening lines of the movement alternate quotations from the beginning of the libretto sung by the choruses with details of the formal, bediamonded audience (or certain sections of it), which is contrasted with the imagined colorfulness and lack of pretense of the country people who attended the initial performance of Bach's *Passion* in 18th century Leipzig. The natural inclination has been to read this in Poundian fashion as a contrast between the cultural sterility of the present and the more organic environment that supported Bach's work, although the gossips' quoted are clearly less interested in Bach's music than the inordinate number of children he had. Later, early in "A"-8, Zukofsky will revisit the original performance of Bach's *Passion* to emphasize the practical difficulties he faced and the dubious reaction to the work of at least part of the audience (45-46), and there is brief mention of Bach's difficulties in finding an audience at the end of "A"-6 (150-151/38). Bach's cultural circumstances do not represent an ideal against which the present is found wanting, and that type of cultural critique, so basic to Pound, Eliot and many other modernists, is largely absent from "A". Although Zukofsky will at times recognize a historical progression of increasing abstraction, he does not posit some ideal unfallen state of the individual or society that has been lost—abstraction is inherent to human consciousness and moments of perfection can be experienced at any time. Nevertheless, there is a satiric distinction in the opening of "A"-1 between the typically morbid formality of the bourgeois audience of classical concerts and some less class based reception, not requiring the price of a ticket (other than obligatory attendance at church). Presumably the unexpected choice of "fiddles" in the opening lines is a gesture in this direction. Throughout the movement there is a running alternation between haves and have-nots that culminates in the caricature of an amoral business magnate at the end. The satirical interpolation on bad poetry can then be seen as the inevitable result of the catering to the expectations of such an audience, predictable entertainment that reinforces one's sense of cultural and class superiority. In a word, the poet is mulling over how he can write relevantly for his times, and at the very least Bach's *Passion* functions as an implicit social critique.

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<sup>18</sup> Although not italicized, the final line is quoted from the *Passion* libretto.

However, if the message of the *Passion* is that its listeners must wake up to their fallen condition, which both then and now most of the audience choose to ignore, the Christian mythopoetic form of this truth is no longer available for this poet.

In the final segment of the movement, the poet wakes up the next morning sobered from the intoxication of Bach's music, as if it "were only a taunt" (116/4). At this point Zukofsky introduces an image, that of a flower, the liveforever, that he will develop extensively in "A"-2. Here it represents, every bit as predictably conventional as the earlier poets he dismisses, Bach's music or more precisely its effect, which has now worn off and with it the loss of a perception of "perfecting" (117/4). The liveforever is not an image of the art work as a vision of perfection nor as a more perfect social manifestation. The gerund form is exact and it is this form that the art work holds before the eyes—that the world or the real is never static, never as is, but is constantly actively realizing itself. I take it that Zukofsky is already adopting Spinoza's ideas (although there are other possible sources), for whom any entity (whether thought of as an individual or as society as a whole) necessarily aspires to endure, that is to increase its power, reality or perfection, which is never teleological but always dynamically participating in the whole. As mentioned, the utopian passage where everything is as if effortless is an articulation of such power or perfection. When the poet wakes up the next morning, it is as if the world reasserts its power over the poet as obstruction and limitation. Now all is thoroughly drab and seemingly irredeemable: worms chew the trees, smoke soots the buildings, cheap love in a taxi (perhaps the frustrated taxi rides of Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* or Eliot's "throbbing taxi"), which leads into another scene of unemployment, class strife, the diabolic evocation of Magnus as some arch-manipulator of the world and a few final apocalyptic lines from Bach: "Open, O fierce flaming pit!"

While there is little in the first movement to suggest that these concluding lines are meant to be read ironically, it has to be said that much of this is quite atypical of the poem "A" will become and of Zukofsky's work generally. The elements of class animus, satire, apocalyptic flourishes are all gestures Zukofsky will strip from his work, but I have argued that these appear quite prevalently in key early works—most importantly "Poem beginning 'The,'" but also in a cluster of other pieces of around the same time (See Z-Notes commentary on "Poem beginning 'The'"). The rather oblique lines in "A"-1 of spitting across the sand dunes and drowning worlds (114/2)—a comical allusion to the wasteland and Flood motifs—seems to me displaced from a verse review of a performance of George Antheil's *Ballet Mécanique*, in which Zukofsky, while not entirely convinced by the work, is sympathetic to Antheil's in-the-face of the bourgeois audience stance and is himself tempted to spit from the cheap seats down onto the audience below—down in the pit.<sup>19</sup> What is particularly striking about Zukofsky's quite rapid abandonment of the manner of "Poem beginning 'The,'" despite the residual elements we have noted, is that one might think the time, heading into the politically overheated period of the 1930s, would encourage rather than discourage these propensities which are found so ubiquitously across modernism, not least, for example, in Pound or even Eliot, not to mention a high proportion of Leftist rhetoric. However, for the moment, I am more concerned with pointing out an uncertainty in Zukofsky's poem at this point, which manifests itself in style and technique. We will have occasion to note other instances where it is difficult to tell whether the arch rhetoric signals poetic unsteadiness or intentional manifestations of an earlier self that the poet sees himself as evolving beyond.

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<sup>19</sup> "Critique of Antheil," *The Exile* 4 (Autumn 1928): 81-84.

“A”-2

Although easily overlooked, in some respects this movement is key to the larger sequence of early movements because rather than develop the predictable modernist themes announced in “A”-1, here Zukofsky turns the poem on itself and begins the figural reworking that will be the real engine of “A”. After the subjective framing of “A”-1, loosely stream-of-consciousness, “A”-2 introduces a dissenting voice, and this dialogue with “Kay” will be carried on in “A”-5 and into the first part of “A”-6.<sup>20</sup> It has to be admitted that Kay is barely allowed to articulate his position, and mostly gives the poet an excuse to defend and explain his own intentions. Nonetheless, at least there is the implied presence of a devil’s advocate, and the poet’s major point is one song of many (or two) voices, on the model of the *St. Matthew Passion*. In this sense Kay’s very presence counters his own argument for a singular voice. “A”-2 breaks down into two fairly distinct sections plus a transitional epilogue. In the primary segment, Kay refers back critically to the example of “A”-1 and argues for a “clear music,” suggesting a conventional, mono-voiced lyrical poetry, to which the poet spends the bulk of the movement countering. There is then an abrupt shift as the poet apparently describes a walk and perhaps a train ride, and finally four final lines (five lines in the revised text) that look back and forward.

What is most striking about “A”-2 is its heavy reliance on metaphor, even allegory as its primary organizing technique. To begin with the poet responds to Kay by insisting that poetry is necessarily impacted by the entire material and socio-historical circumstances in which it is situated and must take into account. The poet’s defense is expressed in terms of two dominate metaphors, the sea and a flower (the liveforever, the latter as we noted picked up from “A”-1), with the former representing something like the density of phenomenological existence—including the objective world, history, the social as well as libidinal desire—all those determining forces over which the individual ego has limited control, as well as the raw material out of which anything is made. The flower is a conventional enough image of the poem itself, or any aesthetic object, so we have the composite image of the flower on the sea, which suggests simultaneously the flower-poem as subject to the vicissitudes of the sea while also to a degree transcending it, so this passage ends with the flower floating “over” the sea. Some of the oddity of Zukofsky’s descriptions of the flower dissipates if we keep in mind that he is speaking of the liveforever or houseleek, which strictly speaking is not a flower but has a distinctly flower-like rosette formed by plump succulent leaves—so Zukofsky speaks of leaves, rather than petals, forming around a center. This also has the advantage of evoking the inevitable bookish senses as well as a spatialized image of the poem. Nevertheless, “flower” obviously has considerable poetic resonance, even if at the cost of tilting into symbolism and rather too traditional ideas of beauty.

The sea and flower imagery will recur in “A”-6, where its philosophical framework is made more explicit, so we will pick that up later. For the moment I am more interested in the manner of presentation. It is evident that the poet is trying to articulate a modernist sense of

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<sup>20</sup> Kay is presumably based on Zukofsky’s Columbia classmate, Irving Kaplan, who wrote an essay under the name Roger Kaigh entitled “Paper,” which is quoted at the end of “American Poetry 1920-1930” (*Prep.* 147). For the available biographical facts on Kaplan, see Andrew Crozier, “Paper Bunting,” *Sagetrieb* 14.3 (1995): 58-62. It seems likely that Kay’s voice is introduced in “A”-1 at the point where the poet wakes up the morning after the concert and the aesthetic effect dissipates with the passage beginning: “—I thought that was finished: [...]” It is natural to read this line as an internalized voice, but in the original the line reads: “I thought that was finished, Zukofsky, [...]” (117/5), and at various times in the exchanges with Kay, the latter mockingly plays on Zukofsky’s name (see 118, 139 original text). Of course throughout, “Kay” is as much the poet’s or the poem’s internal interlocutor, one of his “other voices,” as a distinct other person.

expansive possibilities of poetry that refuses to start from prior premises of what poetry is or should be, but instead must be in contact with the ordinary. The music of the poem, the poet insists, is not in its imitation of musical effects or its symbolism, but in the formal structure of the poem itself, a tension of centripetal and centrifugal forces—and in this sense anything can become music or any materials and their combination is possible for the new poetry. And yet here the poet seemingly finds himself falling back on the most conventional poetic images and technique, and even his references to music are hackneyed.

In the first part of the poet's response to Kay introducing the image of the sea, we get a disorderly catalog of images. This is appropriate given the poet's sense of the sea as the world, churning up the raw materials of the possible poem, so he begins with a few sea things (slugs, seaweed, cuttlefish), then abruptly switches to the socio-historical ("ball of imperialism..." nations, etc.), the epic (Agamemnon carrying off loot in the form of women), then a rather oblique passage that introduces for the first time the character of Ricky. These are not primarily themes but textual stuff with the "sea" functioning as short-hand for the social repository of linguistic matter, and "flower" as an ideal of a structured or perceptible order arising out of this mass. In subsequent movements (particularly "A"-5, -6 and -7), we encounter further examples of such random catalogs, but the contents will include a high degree of recycled items, including from this initial catalog in "A"-2. The sea as textual matter flows throughout, churning up old and new matter and dissolving or transmuting whatever structures take shape, the "Clitter-clatter of wave-forms" (119/7). We will examine various examples of textual transmutation in the early movements, but the seeming randomness of such catalogs is a mark of the inevitable limitations of our perception where everything necessarily relates. The sea represents the counter-forces to a static or hierarchical perception of language use or social reality, and a consequence of this is that anything can show up within or next to anything else. Any reader of Zukofsky experiences puzzlement at his propensity for abrupt shifts, particularly shifts in linguistic register or discursive manner, but his sense of poetry as polyvocal not only allows for but requires these other voices (if that is the right word) to insistently assert themselves, to remind us that any utterance implies all manner of others. Nonetheless, music is structured, as the poet insists to Kay, "the music is in the flower, / It is not the sea but hyaline cushions the flower" (119/7).

In this sea-like catalog of items we can detect some associative links as if beginning to take on shape, so that the mention of the rapine of Greek epic heroes evokes caryatids, in origin figures of captive women now manifest as architectural ornaments—not surprisingly there is a fair amount of such social readings of architecture in "A". But then at this point in the original text there is the line, "Please now and thank you" (118), which appears apropos nothing unless we keep in mind this is just word stuff, the most banal politeness juxtaposed with the (rather demystified) epic or heroic. Then there is the puzzling passage relating to Ricky, which I will return to in discussing "A"-3, but simply observe here that this becomes quasi-surreal with centaur-like creatures, blind alleys and the desire to break down walls that somehow seem to be rising and falling (opening and closing) like canal locks, again evoking the ebb and flow of the sea's motion. But it has to be said it is quite impossible to firmly visualize this passage, and if we assume Zukofsky is in the imagist tradition of Pound, we going to have problems since such unfocused passages are not unusual. Symptomatic are a couple of lines that transition to the metaphor of the flower: "Till of an afternoon / Launches the moon upon sea-whorl; green, flowering, / opening leaf within leaf [...]" (119/7). The collocation of the afternoon and moon is difficult to visualize, but they do rhyme. We might imagine that the flower or more precisely the flower-like liveforever as looking like a moon floating or whirling on the sea, but still visual precision hardly seems the point, particularly compared with the visual fussiness of the following once the flower metaphor takes prominence. So it is possible to read this larger passage as beginning with a mish-mash of

images or verbal stuff (the sea), which then becomes focused with the introduction of the flower-poem. But if this is the case, this focus is bought at the cost of the rich nominalist variety and fluid potentiality of the sea's materials, which in fact I take to be the point and why this is an example of poetic failure or at least of limitation. The poet has begun countering Kay by insisting on the an egalitarian openness to the world, that is, to verbal matter both in terms of subject and form, but ends up with in an all too conventional blind-alley of neat symbolism or allegory.

If this is a plausible reading, then it is one that the poet must move beyond, so that the abrupt shift from the elaboration of the sea/flower images to the poet out on a walk, back on ground level noting ordinary random details, is an attempt to shake off the metaphoric habit. Yet the very first line of this passage indicates the poet's inability to resist poetically charging its significance: "I walked out upon Easter Sunday" (120/8). This ties back readily enough with the *St. Matthew Passion* but in doing so risks drawing in a mythopoetics on which he does not want to lean and in which he does not believe. While the poet indicates his desire to turn to a more immediate, less metaphorical manner grounded in mundane existence—walking, his face, traveling by train, a glimpse of a Wrigley's gum ad—the old metaphors reassert themselves in the poet's stated desire to write this down "in a style as of leaves growing." Sure enough, the field becomes an ocean, the Wrigley's sign a "Rose of the Passion," and the entire scene becomes a flower.

One might read this entire movement as indicating Zukofsky's groping to find his stride (an "objective" style we might assume), or we could see the poet as being presented ironically, in the manner of Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, trying out and shedding possibilities. I rather suspect the latter because of the seemingly careful manner this has been set up: beginning with Kay's insistence on a "clear music," the poet launches into an extended defense of an alternative which, in the manner of monologs, gets increasingly entangled or entrapped in its own metaphors, out of which he attempts to break with what appears to be a stab at a walking poem in which the leading metaphors nonetheless assert themselves and that ends: "I crouched again, high—O my God, into the flower!" (120/8). One would imagine this line at least is clear enough music for Kay. From the perspective of long hindsight, it is difficult not to see Zukofsky as mocking his own younger self here, but in any case the entire manner of this movement will be quickly chucked aside, while the central problem it is grappling with, the sea as that in which the poem is necessarily embedded, remains a central concern. We should keep in mind that these early movements are unrealized in the sense that the poet has yet to achieve an appropriate form or technique, so he is fumbling as he attempts to articulate what it is his poetry desires to embody.

However, this reading may not be entirely satisfactory. If we have two rather conventional dominate metaphors put in relation, as noted their respective elaborations are antithetical. The "sea" is, so to speak, enacted as a catalog of verbal matter with only occasional imagistic hints of waves, while the "flower" is meticulously described in precise terms, as if pushing the inevitable symbolic reading back to its incarnation in an actual worldly specimen. We might identify these as displaying the familiar opposition of metonymy and metaphor but only if we recognize how they are mutually defining and interpenetrate each other. Rather than the usual rhetorical claim toward more concrete language use (the species of modernism with which this poet would usually be associated), we have language overtly put into dialectical interplay, which I would argue is Zukofsky's sense of the fugal.

The epilogue to this movement deliberately pulls the reader out of its specific concerns to recall larger contexts: on the one hand the formal model of Bach's *Passion* which the poem aspires to emulate—the double chorus that is one song of many voices—and on the other the obligatory brief quotations from the libretto. The one song of many or two voices

will be picked up particularly in “A”-5 and -6, but in an important sense is already gestured at in this epilogue with its juxtaposition of thematic content and formal structure. The specific lines from the libretto—“*Around Thy tomb here sit we weeping*”— clearly function as a lead into the following movement which is an elegy to the already mysteriously introduced Ricky, in some sense a Christ-like figure whose resurrection is figured by the poem. But Zukofsky characteristically cannot leave matters there and intrudes into the middle of this epilogue the phrase, “For the fun of it,” which given the solemnity of the libretto lines and the movement to follow appears wholly inappropriate (this phrase reappears in “A”-7). As already mentioned, the reader of “A” has to get used to these interruptions since they crop up all over. Aside from Zukofsky’s aversion to excessive solemnity, to the poem becoming too earnest about itself which inevitably leads to moralizing, such intrusions turn the thematic reading against itself, drawing the distinction between what the words say and what they do. Zukofsky rearranged the epilogue somewhat in revision to make it clearer that “For the fun of it” goes with the description of the form of the *Passion* as against the thematic oriented lines from the libretto about weeping at Christ’s tomb. The *Passion* may sing about the agony of Christ’s end but the motivation for singing or music itself is something more positive (and fun).

### “A”-3

This lyrical elegy for a friend dead by suicide demonstrates the formal and generic elasticity that Zukofsky will allow into “A”, with its short lines and flexibly regular stanzas. Many readers have found this movement striking, but little has been said as to what it is doing here—why has it been incorporated into “A” rather than treated as an independent poem? Taking a hint from Zukofsky’s pairing of the early movements, we can recognize that both “A”-3 and -4 concern the personal, as opposed to generally aesthetic/poetic issues, and together define a spectrum that is manifest both thematically and formally. “A”-3 focuses on a specific individual for whom the poet feels a particular intimacy, whatever the specific nature of that relationship may have been, and consequently the elegiac lyric is appropriate for the dark spaces of personal feelings. “A”-4 is personal in terms of familial inheritance, the poet’s Jewish heritage, from which he is alienated. Consequently this movement is the most purely collagist or objectively presented of the early movements and presents a species of argument between the orthodox “fathers” and their children, between “a Speech” (Hebrew) and “jargon” (Yiddish), with the poet’s allegiances clearly indicated. The other early movements can be seen as operating in the zone defined by “A”-3 and -4, a combination of the personal lyric and modernist collage, which in a broad sense can be seen as characteristic of at least the first half of “A” broadly speaking and relates to the challenge of balancing the specificity of immediate, personal experience or sense of the contemporary with conceptions of the larger totality that structures and makes possible such experience.

“A”-3 is arguable the most intimate poem Zukofsky ever published, and in the larger view of his work the subject is unusual, the suicide of Ricky Chambers, younger brother of Whittaker Chambers who was a Columbia classmate and perhaps Zukofsky’s closest friend at the time. The movement’s numerous obliquities function to gesture at much that remains unsaid, whether this is interpreted as due to a grief beyond expression or a secretiveness having to do with the poet’s relations with or feelings about Ricky. In any case, the teasing details that never add up to a coherent picture are effective in creating an aura around Ricky, suggestive of any number of possibilities without ever coming into sharp focus. This itself seems an apt manner to express the intimate, especially in a larger poem so self-conscious about form and the complex mediation of any expression.

Of all the early movements, “A”-3 is the most obvious refiguration of the thematic content of the *Passion*, as Ricky’s life takes on Christ-like elements and his death is

compensated for by a form of resurrection as the poem itself—in this respect echoing the Ricky passage in “Poem beginning ‘The.’” The poet takes on the role of Joseph of Arimathaea, who took responsibility for the recovery and burial of Christ’s body, in this case acting as Ricky’s “mirror” flanked by lights, in other words the poem is an altar (123/10). However, the mythopoetics of Christian resurrection is simply not available to Zukofsky, and so his poem cannot depend on traditional elegiac support. The movement is framed by the drab circumstances of Ricky’s burial with images of automobiles speeding by, a nearby gas tank, a broken stanchion depicting a degraded urban landscape with little hint of regenerative potential. There is also the puzzling mention that no meter is running, which, aside from the obvious stand-in for time that has stopped, could refer to either or both a gas meter (Ricky’s suicide) or to a taxi which the mourners cannot afford to keep waiting while they bury Ricky. There is at least a hint of class resentment here if we recall the autos in “A”-1 that are parked and honking outside Carnegie Hall presumably waiting for the wealthier members of the audience (113/1). We get a somewhat grotesque snapshot of Ricky’s suicide, head in a gas range laying on a pillow, and fragments of conversation suggesting Ricky’s rather lurid life. Ricky is strongly associated with the sexual, with a risqué sensuality. There is mention of a cat, with suggestions of night prowling as well as the obvious enough sexual suggestions of “Puss” (there is a cat prowling section in “Poem beginning ‘The’” as well). There is Ricky being warned not to cross bridges after midnight, and mention of his success with women. The original version includes an extended passage that plays on erections and condoms (a related passage survives in “A”-6.23-24). These images are all mixed in with details of Ricky’s actual suicide and perhaps the night it took place—in the original there are suggestions of drunkenness and driving in the dark.<sup>21</sup> While the details of Ricky’s life and death decidedly verge on the sordid, this is counterbalanced in the second half by images of innocence and romance—crying in the rain and associations with Richard the Lionheart. There seems little that is heroic or even particularly romantic about Ricky’s life, but presumably the point is the sense of childhood innocence that somehow goes wrong, and at least by implication there is a condemnation of society’s shortcomings. Thwarted childhood as a measure of society’s failures appears a number of times in the first half of “A” (see especially the end of “A”-10). Ricky’s identification with Richard the Lionheart, perhaps having its roots in a childhood nickname or interest, stands for an innocent and extravagant potential that is doomed in current circumstances.<sup>22</sup> In this context Ricky’s sexual adventurousness and anti-conventional lifestyle may be seen by the poet as romantic yet doomed.

The unresolved ambivalence of Ricky’s presentation reflects Zukofsky’s own refusal to take on the role of cultural hero, which typically involves the poet as victim, suffering the failures of contemporary culture and history. For all the talk of “impersonality,” this is the framework that gave the early work of T.S. Eliot so much salience at the time or why many readers take *The Pisan Cantos* to be the most successful section of *The Cantos*. Even more than these poets, Zukofsky was always willing to allow autobiographical materials directly into his work, but for the most part they do not structure an emotional center that then radiates throughout the other materials, however far-ranging, and implies a moral critique.

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<sup>21</sup> If one wishes to pursue the autobiographical possibilities of this passage and Zukofsky’s relationship with Ricky, see Cid Corman, “A’-3: RICKY with addenda: 1-9,” *Origin* 5, fifth series (Spring 1985): 38-66. Corman speculates at length and convinces himself that Zukofsky must have been with Ricky the night of his suicide.

<sup>22</sup> Retrospectively in his autobiography *Witness* (1952), Whittaker Chambers claims that his sense of society’s responsibility for Ricky’s suicide was a major impetus for his conversion to Communism. An odd number of details about Ricky in “A”-3 reappear in *Witness*, but nothing about Ricky’s sexual adventures.

The exception is “A”-10 on the fall of France in 1940 in which the poet attempts to identify with suffering taking place on an inexpressible scale and vents outrage at political betrayal, but then for that very reason this movement sticks out for many as the most atypical in all of “A”, perhaps across all Zukofsky’s writings. In this regard, it is worth noting how little advantage Zukofsky takes of the Passion as a theme in these early movements. Although “A”-1 shows clear possibilities of the alienated poet in a fallen world and I have suggested Ricky is something of a Christ-like figure, none of this is given much emphasis nor developed elsewhere. Particularly compared with the importance of Bach’s *Passion* as a formal model, the thematic possibilities remain quite stillborn, despite the occasional apocalyptic flourish quoted from the libretto. As I have already argued, such mythopoetics simply did not strike Zukofsky as relevant motivation for at least his sense of the contemporary world or what poetry should and can do in the present.

A few words need to be said about the revisions to this movement which proportionately is the most heavily effected, having been reduced by a third from its original. Mostly what has been cut is from what I have designated the sordid details of Ricky’s life in the first half, particularly, as mentioned, the complete elimination of a 19-line passage of off-color humor on erections and condoms. I suspect few would disagree that the revised version is a better poem, especially if we assume its main intent is elegiac, with a better balance between the dark first half and more innocent second half. Nevertheless it is worth noting Zukofsky’s persistent propensity to complicate and diffuse any overall dominate tone in “A”, to interject dissonant and disorienting voices as if the sea is constantly pressing on the poem to allow more in. What Zukofsky cut out and some of what he left in seems at odds with what we would expect of an elegy for a friend, and generally speaking fixing on a generic framework or tone for given movements or segments is likely to lead reading astray. This is to say, Zukofsky is constantly turning up the corners of the verbal texture so that we are reminded that discourse is always situated among discourses. This, I have argued, is essential to Zukofsky’s conception of the fugal, the hearing of other voices in and around any given piece of text. The introduction of ribald humor into a poem on the suicide of a friend might be understood in a number of senses: as a fond and shared memory, as a felt truth about his friend regardless of respectable appropriateness, as a defensive humor against the sense of despair or the poet’s ambiguous feelings, as a fragile positive note savaged from the oblivion of death. A shrine or memorial altar is both an acknowledgement of death and a hope that something survives, and suicide represents an act of ultimate negation. In any case, it is simply characteristic of “A” generally that no tone will be allowed to settle for too long and sudden interruptions that initially seem inappropriate or simply willful are so common that the reader had best get used to them.

We should consider the wider presence of Ricky, who is one of two characters who appear intermittently in the early movements of “A”, the other being Kay with whom the poet debates poetics. Ricky is something of a bodily antithesis to the cerebral relations with Kay. An intriguing character, Ricky’s appearances across many of Zukofsky’s early major works might be explained by the trauma of losing a close friend to suicide, but that hardly explains his function in the texts. Ricky first appears in an extended passage in “Poem beginning ‘The’” (CSP 11-13; lines 76-109), where he is not explicitly named but referred to as “Lion-heart.” Although the emphasis is on his death and burial, the treatment lacks the realistic details of “A”-3 and is decidedly mythopoetic—Ricky as a victim of the wasteland of contemporary culture and a figure of youth and resurrection as enacted by the poem itself (there are clear echoes of *The Waste Land* in this passage). In a peculiarly enigmatic passage early in “A”-2 we encounter the first naming of Ricky, marking the first of five movements in

which he will appear (“A”-3, -5, -6 and -7), and he is obliquely alluded to in “A”-8 as well.<sup>23</sup> In “A”-2 Ricky appears in a passage mentioning sailors with rather comical sexual suggestions (118-119/6-7). Apparently Ricky Chambers was bisexual—or at least that is how Zukofsky seems to present him—who was both successful with women and cruised for sailors, and at the very least Zukofsky was fascinated. Perhaps this was the fascination with someone living a life outside convention, a pursuit of the erotic and of experiences beyond what Zukofsky himself felt possible for himself—certainly well beyond the pale of anything imaginable in his orthodox Jewish family (the Chambers family was Roman Catholic). There are certainly indications of homoerotic temptation associated with Ricky, but whether this is more than the allure of the forbidden we simply do not have enough evidence to responsibly speculate. Nevertheless, Ricky’s appearances always suggest the sexual, and here in “A”-2 there is the explicit mention of “lust,” sailors and bums sticking out of portholes (or is it bums sticking through holes in trousers?). The quasi-surrealist lines at the top of page 7 evoke a centaur and might be read as a vision of Ricky on the prowl, going up “blind alleys” of uncertain experience, desiring “to break [thru] the cross-walls” of convention or taboo. But if this is the case, Zukofsky is conflating this with the poet himself groping in his search for poetic possibilities beyond the lanes already laid out by tradition. In “A”-6 (134-135, 138/23-24, 26) Ricky is mentioned five times (three times in the revised version). The main passage is one of those sea-like catalogs which evokes the Ricky passage of “A”-2 (sailors), “A”-3 (romance), as well as collocated with details from “A”-4 (carousel), plus adding another instance of the off-color humor on erections that appeared in the original version of “A”-3. In “A”-8 we encounter a final instance: the half dozen lines at the top of page 87 repeat various details from “A”-3 (“cemetery,” “running-board,” “trappings rise,” “no bridges...not after midnight”—with the “breeches” perhaps echoing “A”-2’s “trousers,” but the former term offering more punning possibilities).<sup>24</sup> These Ricky repeats, although toned down in revision, are a particularly notable example of the extent of this technique throughout the first seven movements (and in this case extending into “A”-8), but which thereafter trail off as Zukofsky’s conception of the repeat or recurrence becomes less programmatic. But before we leave Ricky, if we glance a dozen lines further down the same page we encounter a beach scene with strongly sensuous suggestions, and it seems safe to assume that Ricky is the person described. In all probability this is based on memories of summers spent at the Chambers’ home near Long Island’s south shore, the setting of a number of Zukofsky’s short poems and where the young urbanite poet no doubt experienced a sense of bodily liberation.<sup>25</sup>

Finally, returning to the question of why “A”-3? There is really nothing else like this movement in the rest of “A” or perhaps even in Zukofsky’s work generally, although in the longer and larger view interesting comparisons can be made with other movements, such as the extreme reticence of “A”-16, which might be interpreted as deeply personal, or to “A”-17 and its entirely different formal presentation on the death of Williams, or perhaps even to the Kennedy passages of “A”-15 which become a lament for humankind or more specifically on human violence. Both the subject matter and the technical presentation of “A”-3 gesture toward the intimate as beyond expression, diffused out into the ephemerality of personal but

<sup>23</sup> The mention of Ricky in “A”-5 (129) was deleted along with most of the first page or so in revision.

<sup>24</sup> The “running-board” reference disappeared from “A”-3 (121) in revision, although it survives in “A”-6 (138/26).

<sup>25</sup> The connecting detail is the “dark hair” which echoes “A”-3.10.11—originally this line read: “Dark hair, two dark heads” (123) and presumably refers to Ricky and Whittaker Chambers. There is also a possible rain repeat. Quite a few short poems written in the 1920s and early 30s are set on the beach, which are almost certainly associated with these visits. See e.g. *CSP* 29, 30, 31, 47—the “Wickson” addressed in “Poem 15 (And looking to where shone Orion)” is Whittaker Chambers; further relevant poems were published but uncollected.

strongly felt relations which inevitably evoke a sense of mortality. As mentioned there is at least an implied critique of society that tends, like those cars speeding by Ricky's grave, to ignore or run rough-shod over these finer sensibilities. The personal is important throughout "A" and rarely does Zukofsky hide himself or attempt to objectify the poem into, for example, the historical or dramatic monologues. Yet the personal is always self-consciously an effect of the language, and Zukofsky's formalism demystifies unmediated expression or autobiography. The self exists as mirrored by others in language, like Ricky in the mirror-altar of the poem. Thus "A"-3 can be read as marking or gesturing at a limit which will not be returned to again or at least not in such a melodramatic manner (although "A"-10, particularly its end, might be an exception). This limit also indicates the taboo or socially transgressive, which plays little part in Zukofsky's work as content or theme, however outrageous his formal experiments. The libidinal, sexuality, as well as the abject rarely enter into Zukofsky's work, and when they do they tend to be disguised by or combined with the comical, often as punning or other such word play ("A"-18 written under the shadow of the Vietnam War would be the primary example).

"A"-4

Since I have discussed "A"-4 in a separate commentary that focuses particularly on the question of how Zukofsky situates himself vis-à-vis his Jewish heritage, I will restrict myself here to how this movement fits with the larger sequence of the early movements. I have already suggested that paired with "A"-3, "A"-4 both compliments and is positioned in antithesis to the previous movement—it is personal but in the most impersonal sense of the poet's familial inheritance, entirely beyond personal choice or the uniqueness of intimate experience yet inexorably marking every aspect of one's character. The emphasis of both "Poem beginning 'The'" and "A"-4 is Zukofsky's break with this inheritance, his family, Jewishness and even Yiddish, all of which threaten to limit the more expansive conception of his poetic identity expressed at the conclusion of the earlier poem, while at the same time acknowledging their inescapable role in his makeup (see also Z-notes commentary on "Poem beginning 'The'"). Like "A"-3, "A"-4 seems in terms of its primary subject matter to one side of the main trajectory of the first seven movements, and the topic of Jewishness will all but disappear from "A" and Zukofsky's work generally (with the exception of *Thanks to the Dictionary*), until "A"-12 (1951), prompted by the combination of his father's death and the decimation of the East European culture in which he grew up.

Indeed, the debate at the heart of "A"-4—the fathers identified with an orthodox faith, Hebrew and a permanent sense of exile set over against their children's identification with Yiddish and secular assimilation—never recurs subsequently in Zukofsky's writing. If "A"-4 obviously extends Zukofsky's early dialog with his Jewish heritage, the familial and generational framing offers a range of other levels of interpretation where children must break with the law of the fathers, such as modernist free verse breaking from poetic tradition. Indeed, Yiddish is a hybrid vernacular ("jargon"), precisely what characterizes the tendencies of free verse as opposed to an ossified conception of conventional poetry, the fluidity and generative creativity of the everyday spoken language and its performative dimension as opposed to the language of the book.<sup>26</sup> Thus the first instance of Yiddish, translated out of Yehoash, is an example of japonaiserie (Shimaunu-Sān), indicating not only the

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<sup>26</sup> On this point see "American Poetry 1920-1930," in which Zukofsky quotes "Roger Kaigh"'s "Paper" on the reifying propensities of the written (*Prep.* 146-147). For the intriguing background of Kaigh's essay and its importance to Zukofsky, see Andrew Crozier, "Paper Bunting," *Sagetrieb* 14.3 (1995): 45-74, and the full essay is available in Basil Bunting, *Three Essays* (Durham, U.K.: Basil Bunting Poetry Centre, 1994): 7-19, where the essay appears with the title, "The Written Record..." and was mistakenly attributed to Bunting.

internationalism Zukofsky apparently identifies with “Yiddish” but possibly a conscious echo of Pound’s *Cathay*, that seminal work of free verse that paradoxically transforms a poetry more thoroughly convention bound than anything found in the West into an exemplary instance of limpid plain speaking.

Some would point out, truthfully, that Zukofsky’s very rejection of a Jewish poetic identity is itself a characteristically Jewish gesture or at least typical of many secularized Jews. Indeed, Zukofsky evidently did not feel this issue was sufficiently taken care of in “Poem beginning ‘The’” or else felt the need to extend it into “A”, even if only to leave the topic quiescent until circumstances determined to awaken it again in a quite different mode. This too is how “A” operates. Also “A”-8 can be seen as developing formally out of “A”-4, a comparatively rigorously presented collage text that not entirely by happenstance concerns other inherited “courses” that feed into the poet’s identity, that of American history and Leninist Marxism set against a larger thematic backdrop of labor—but also including a vignette of his father’s arrival in New York (83).

What needs to be emphasized is the dialogic or fugal presentation, so that if Zukofsky’s allegiance is with “jargon” in opposition to “Speech,” the former is obviously thoroughly marked by, indeed inconceivable without the latter. However, this debate as such does not account for the movement as a whole and the dialectical third term is represented by the opening lyric, a discrete poem that is not only formally distinct but appears to have no relation with the Jewish themes of the rest of the movement.<sup>27</sup> If the poet affirms the value of Yiddish and Yehoash in the debate over inheritance, they do not represent a poetic model for Zukofsky. Yehoash’s poetry, judging from the various samples appearing both here and in “Poem beginning ‘The,’” tends toward the Romantic both in subject matter and style, replete with nature imagery or taking on exotic settings.<sup>28</sup> In contrast, the opening lyric is urban, lean, rigorously modernist (even more so in revision), indeed an exemplary objectivist poem, that also happens to be the first major appearance of horses in “A”. So it is safe to say it represents Zukofsky’s position, which I would suggest stands outside the debate preoccupying center stage of “A”-4 because the poet does not wish to replicate the oedipal struggle but to shift to a fraternal relation with his potential poetic and personal inheritances. I will return to this poem below.

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<sup>27</sup> Cid Corman observes that the *An “Objectivists” Anthology* version lacks a movement number for “A”-4, so the opening poem reads as a continuation of “A”-3. Unfortunately, Corman failed to note the errata page slipped into copies of the *Anthology* which clearly indicate this is a printing error. Nevertheless he correctly points out the formal continuity of the opening lyric with “A”-3, which contrasts sharply with the rest of “A”-4. See “‘A’-3: RICKY with addenda: 1-9” (1985): 60. Also worth quickly noting is that “A”-4 is the only early movement that was significantly rearranged in revision, as opposed to simply deleting and condensing. Essentially the revised version simplifies or clarifies by sorting out the collaged pieces dealing with the fathers from those dealing with Yehoash, whereas originally they were more intermingled. Also a substantial autobiographical passage (20 lines) was entirely deleted, relating to Mark Van Doren and the *Menorah Journal* (see discussion in Z-notes commentary on “A”-4 and also Stephen Fredman, *A Menorah for Athena: Charles Reznikoff and the Jewish Dilemmas of Objectivist Poetry* (2001): 126-137).

<sup>28</sup> This is not to say Zukofsky may not have imitated Yehoash in his earlier, student-period verse, which is much more traditionally romantic and includes at least a couple instances of japonaiserie. See e.g. “Walking Down the White Sand Streets of Kamakura” in *The Morningside* 9.4 (Jan. 1921) and “Glamour” in *Rhythmus* 1.3 (March 1923). We know Zukofsky’s interest in Yehoash reaches back to at least 1920 when he submitted a translation to *Poetry* (see *SL* 22), but there is no mention of him after “A”-4.

“A”-5

This movement is particularly difficult to get a handle on because it is preoccupied with writing and rewriting which manifests itself in tryouts. It concludes with a typical Zukofskian phrase—“Words ranging forms”—typical in its enigmatic suggestiveness: words arrange forms or forms arrange words, words define the range of forms or words searching for forms. The evident echo is with a key line in “A”-2: “Leaf around leaf ranged around the center” (119/7), but just as there is a shift from metaphor to signifier, any such neat center now seems elusive and the imagistic precision of the earlier line gives way to more verbally suggestive phrase that may or may not be a sentence.<sup>29</sup>

“A”-5 opens with a poem or an attempt at a poem that has a title of sorts: “An animate still-life—(night)” (128/17). The allusion to painting is unusual for Zukofsky but helps frame what is going on here. The situation described has the poet holding in one hand a leaf (brown since it is autumn) and in the other a lit cigarette, which he brings close to the edge of the leaf, then he reads the text on the cigarette:

DUNHILL

Comfort. (129/17)

Apparently this is a quasi-cubist exercise, an “animate still-life,” and there is a certain amount of geometric emphasis: the thread down the middle of the leaf, edges, horizontal lettering, the cigarette held vertically and also obliquely. This is a composition of what is, literally, ready to hand, contingent elements which include some mention of contextual contingencies as well: the city’s university, tree branches and the air or space marked out by the branches. The poet is composing, attempting to create a poem that does not depend on the metaphorical or on mythopoetics but simply the formal arrangement of the matter of fact and ending with a literal reading of a text, which is now conflated with reading design in the world. The poet is not attempting to capture a moment or experience, and the descriptive precision is less visual per se than a method of composition, moving from thing to thing or word to word. This in fact anticipates how numerous passages in “A” will be generated, a method of bracketing preconceived hierarchies. The concluding “Comfort” might be taken as a small, final gesture of the poem’s meaning, a resolution of its fragmentariness—the comfort of a cigarette (Zukofsky was a life-long smoker and in “A”-1 and -6 the poet is smoking Camels, so the Dunhill may be an indulgence), of a fine autumn day, of composing, or simply a signifier that moves the poem beyond purely visual contingency.

This opening poem offers a symptomatic example of Zukofsky’s revising practice: a passage of 17 lines is reduced to eight, 62 words to 21. In reworking this passage, which admittedly in its original form comes off as a bit mechanical, Zukofsky condenses it into a tight urban imagist poem, hyper-modern in its elliptical presentation and taking better advantage of the visual spacing on the page. It is important in reading “A” to recognize these discrete units as complete poems, as with the poem that begins “A”-4, even while they ask to be considered in their larger contexts. A considerable collection of such poems could be gathered from “A”.<sup>30</sup> In this case, what is lost in revision is the sense of compositional process, unless one reads the revised poem as fragmentary in the sense of deliberately unfinished, which does not strike me as plausible. In terms of improving this segment as a distinct poem, it is easy to justify Zukofsky’s revisions, but the result is perhaps less helpful

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<sup>29</sup> Actually I am cheating here somewhat since the line from “A”-2 originally read, “Leaf around leaf wrapped around the center leaf” (119), but the revision is a good example of Zukofsky’s usual deft improvement.

<sup>30</sup> Much later, beginning with “A”-14 (1964), Zukofsky will habitually begin most of the long movements of “A” with discrete poems as preludes, and all the “voice offs” Zukofsky interpolated into “A”-21 can be read as poems in their own right. Not by happenstance, 1964 marks the publication of his last small collection of short poems, *After I’s*, after which everything goes into “A”.

to the reader in indicating the larger concerns and manner of the movement. By the time Zukofsky was revising the early movements, he was less interested in process, in mapping the growth of the poem, which it has to be said was better done by Williams—in this regard it is difficult to compete with *Spring and All*. Zukofsky's strengths were in dynamic structures rather than mapping process.

What follows for the next page is predominately a simple, seemingly random catalog, which possibly starts from mention of the "city's university" in the opening "still-life" but soon mostly consists of repeated phrases and images from previous movements: Veit Bach's playing along with his grinding mill stones ("A"-4), Ricky Coeur de Lion ("A"-3), "carousel horse," "pledged turtle doves," tessellation (all "A"-4), liveforever ("A"-2), and there is another flurry of repeats a page further on. This should remind us of the sea catalog in "A"-2, the churning repository of textual matter out of which and back into which the poet attempts to momentarily construct a "design." Again, quite a bit of this was cut out in revision. Such catalogic passages function as a reminder of the larger totality within and against which the poet necessarily works or is worked on. That a high proportion of the listed entities are textual repeats erodes the illusion of stability of any given articulation and foregrounds the constant recasting or "ranging" characteristic of verbal materials. Interpolated into these seemingly random regurgitations are further episodes from the exchange between Kay and the poet. The former once again objects to the chaotic manner of the preceding—"offal" he mockingly calls it (in revision this "offal" only survives in its repeat in "A"-7.42.15)—and he then makes a remark about following the next lunatic in case of emergency. This latter quip might remind one of Lukács' famous objection to the method of modernism (particularly stream-of-consciousness, but including collage (non-narrative) forms broadly conceived) as fundamentally irrational, awash in the sea of random association and contingency and consequently merely symptomatic of a time of crisis rather than projecting an order of understanding onto the materials as an appropriate response to history. Zukofsky himself had objected in the opening section of "Poem beginning 'The'" to the excessive negativity of the elder modernists, symptomatically reflecting their sense of alienation and cultural malaise but falling short of offering a constructive response. The poet's riposte to Kay is equally flippant, referring to Faust, Goethe, Bernarr Macfadden and then giving a vernacular reference to Helena (Goethe's name is also hyphenated to indicate its common mispronunciation by English speakers). What the poet is getting at is obscure, perhaps purposely so, but again I suggest we need to listen to this passage. On the one hand we have a high-brow allusion to Goethe's *Faust* which is immediately pulled down by the comparison of Goethe with a flamboyant health and body-builder crusader turned pulp publisher and a leering reference to Helena. The suggestion, then, is that neither the romantic image of "modern man" (Faust) nor a more classically romantic conception of the genius poet stands a chance in contemporary commercial circumstances.<sup>31</sup> But it may not be very important to figure out exactly what is meant here except that this is a continuation of the high-spirited exchange between Kay and the poet which becomes a major fugal thread carried over from "A"-2. The basic terms of the exchange are already established in "A"-2—the poet defending his poetic conception and its contemporaneity with Kay as mockingly skeptical counterpoint—and it is more the incorporation of this ongoing and never resolvable dialog that is significant rather than the

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<sup>31</sup> In the original version of "A"-5, Faust is "aquaplaning," which might mean flying around in a seaplane, an appropriate contemporization of Faust's flitting around the world, or a comical image of Faust on an aqua-board pulled by a motor boat. In either case the word is presumably used here as new, trendy slang. My guess is that this may have been suggested by the fact that Macfadden was one of the very first private owners of an airplane (purchased in 1929) and flew it himself around the country. Ever the attention seeker, he also became a parachute enthusiast and famously celebrated several birthdays in his 80s with jumps.

specific points of the argument. Again, if we are reading *The Cantos* we feel compelled to sort out the specific argument, whereas with “A” it is more a matter of registering the argumentative tone and the dialogic principle.

The poet then picks up “A”-2’s images of the flower and sea, but the former is now a leaf (drawing on the image in the opening poem) with an emphasis on its edge rather than the leaves folding around a center, thus contingency rather than symbolism. There is a quick exchange in which Kay observes that the poet’s poetics are rootless, picking up on the floating over the sea image of “A”-2. This the poet acknowledges with “*The courses we tide from*,” quoting from the preceding movement where he rejected writing out of a specifically Jewish identity, which is simply one of the various “courses” that necessarily flow into his makeup. All of this feeds into the poet’s primary theme or argument of “One song / Of many voices.” However, in the original text these two lines read: “I shall continue one song / Tho’ its sound go two ways, / My two voices” (130/18), which is matched by the preceding “Two voices” (revised to: “Our voices” 129/17). Zukofsky apparently preferred at this time the more dialectical image, the interweaving and exchange of antithetical materials, which in fact is quite characteristic throughout his life. In his correspondence with Pound, Zukofsky suggested a distinction between Pound’s polyphonic method, whereas his own is one voice “thematically split in two,” but he also suggests Pound’s voices are angelic whereas his own is human (*EP/LZ* 112). Zukofsky’s interactions with Pound are always necessarily complicated, and it is possible to hear a certain critique of Pound in these observations. Pound’s brilliant encompassing of multiple voices in *The Cantos*, predominately from history, is held in check by the imposition of his “angelic” overriding of the whole work. As many have noted, for all the poem’s multiplicity there is insufficient allowance for self-critical voices because underneath it all Pound is making a monologic argument. Zukofsky on the other hand seems from the outset to have been quite conscious of the problem of keeping antithetical voices in play within the very structure of his poem, which he here expresses as another within any voice. This is not merely a matter of introducing counter voices, such as Kay, and ever since at least Plato we have known that this type of dialogic structure tends to collapse into monolog in practice. I have already noted a few instances of the seemingly jarring or even inappropriate intrusion of other materials, which rarely present themselves as a different argument but as a dissonance and difference within the very texture of the poem.

This is what I take to be happening in the passage immediately following the declaration of one song out of two (or many) voices, which begins by referring to the *St. Matthew Passion* and somehow ends up in rat-lofts. The clue, so to speak, is in the “lofts,” which appears in the first instance as the loft where the boys’ choir is singing and then as the rat-lofts that are apparently a memory from Zukofsky’s childhood. So we have high and low images, with the angelic tendency of the boys’ singing or the *Passion* generally counterpointed by a more gritty memory. The transition comes as, “Or say, words have knees / water’s in them, all joints crack,—” (130/18), again a typically comical gesture—words, even poetic words can be creaky and awkward (and can creak in saying so) just as much as they can mimic the ethereal. The poet’s insistence is that his poetry must encompass both tendencies. The rat-loft memory involves a light apparently coming through a trefoil-shaped aperture, which leads to the following stanza since “trefoil” is another name for “purple clover,” introducing an imagistic detail supposedly referring to Zukofsky’s recently deceased mother. But then the stanza abruptly shifts to: “Speech bewailing a Wall, / Night of economic extinctions / Death’s encomium—.” There is little difficulty putting these two halves together thematically, as they both have to do with death and Zukofsky’s mother was a displaced

Jew.<sup>32</sup> But what is puzzling, if we register it, is the switch in style from imagistic to more abstract and symbolic, which is then finished off with the line: “And day, leaves blowing over and over.” This last is concrete enough yet immediately takes on obvious metaphorical significances in this context, although the specific image here is so conventionalized that one might wonder whether it really is concrete, particularly since leaves are another reiterated image. Zukofsky tends to complicate even our designations of “concrete” or “abstract,” constantly turning the language back on itself. This, I am suggesting, is what Zukofsky means by two voices, which can manifest themselves in infinite forms or materials, a constant play and dialectic within the poetic texture that, like the sea, never settles.

Beginning with the phrase, “Of an afternoon” (131/18) we encounter a different sort of revision once we recognize that there are actually three versions of this passage scattered across “A”-2, -5 and -6. The time indicated suggests this might be related to the moment in “A”-2 that announces the appearance of the flower on the sea, but the passage we are interested in appears a little later in that movement. I argued above that on the final page of “A”-2 the poet attempts to shake off his metaphorical manner with a walk which apparently becomes or is followed by a train ride. The various walks and train rides that crop up in the early movements are, like the “animate still-life” that leads off “A”-5, obvious means of composing without preconceptions—they become an egalitarian method of composing with contingencies, finding design in what happens in situ. The passage from “A”-2 that concerns us appears to be determined by the perspective from a train seeing an advertising sign for Wrigley’s chewing gum, whose red and green is implicitly associated with the liveforever, but here is explicitly associated with the blood and implied resurrection of the Passion (120/8).<sup>33</sup> Then there is a view of a field in which appear a pair of lovers or a boy and girl playing at being lovers. Whether these two views are the same or contingent as the train moves is ambiguous. In any case, as pointed out earlier, the impression of this passage is markedly symbolic and conventionally poetic, and the primary symbols of the sea and flower established in the main part of “A”-2 seem to force themselves onto this instance of the poet’s “literal” perception. In “A”-5 we have a field, two windows behind which can be seen a heavy person moving, then the Wrigley’s sign which is now more clearly adjacent to the field, and then someone yelling for “Eveline,” presumably her mother whose laundry evokes a punning joke on B.V.M (Beata Virgo Maria or Blessed Virgin Mary) and B.V.D. (underwear). Again it is not easy to focus all this, but the treatment compared with “A”-2 is decidedly more realistic and less poetic. Indeed the mildly off-color joke is apparently intended to debunk an “immaculate” conception of aesthetics (the explicitly Roman Catholic references have been cut out in revision). A few pages later near the beginning of “A”-6, we get yet another version of the passage but this time markedly more focused—the field has disappeared (although in the original version it appears in the first line of the movement just four lines prior to this passage), and the Wrigley’s sign has transmuted into an onomatopoeic description of Eveline in action or interaction with the boys. The indistinct bulk behind the window is now the apparently familiar and likeable Mrs. Green, Eveline’s mother, and so we have a fairly straightforward glimpse of an urban neighborhood vignette (132/21).

I take it that this series of rewritings is intended to sketch the trajectory of these early movements as the poet better understands and becomes confident about how to write his

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<sup>32</sup> However, the fact that this grave is that of Zukofsky’s mother is only available to the reader if informed by a knowing annotator. Barry Ahearn first made this identification and noted its repeat at “A”-6.38, and he is no doubt correct (*Zukofsky’s “A”: An Introduction* (1983): 66). Zukofsky’s mother died in Jan. 1927.

<sup>33</sup> The liveforever commonly has a reddish hue on its outer edges, which Zukofsky is presumably referring to in “A”-2 with the mention of “ferruginous / The flower bears the iron-rust lightly” (120/7).

poem. Most fundamentally this is a process of trusting particulars rather than relying on the conventions of symbolism, allusion and poetic style as authenticating underpinnings of the writing. So our passage in “A”-2 strongly suggests the symbolic and poetic in manner, becomes in “A”-5 more realistic but pervasively satiric, and finally in “A”-6 it is more straightforwardly presented, unadorned and disciplined. One can well imagine that this last in particular shows the influence of Williams, although the final word play on Wrigley’s is pure Zukofsky. However, the point is not that Zukofsky here finds his voice or style, and we surely do not think of “A” as imagist-realist in that manner. The point is simply the trust in crafted words without reliance on traditional poetic mannerisms. This was the task set by free verse—if the first heave was to chuck the iambic, the subsequent demand was to get rid of the other crutches: poetic diction and subject manner, myth, allusion. It is worth recalling that the year “A”-5 and -6 were composed, Zukofsky had a large hand in Williams’ essay on “The Work of Gertrude Stein” (1930), with its endorsement of Stein’s radical cleansing operation on the language so that it could be used anew.<sup>34</sup> However, one could take the view that these three versions are equal rather than sketching a progression, even though the first version seems in a manner that Zukofsky rarely uses and the third version gives the impression when read against the others of snapping into focus. Nevertheless it would be mistaken to assume that Zukofsky aspires to an imagistic ideal, even though he was quite content to echo Pound’s general advice as reliable rules of thumb. But for Zukofsky there is no intrinsic criteria for this or that language use and the value of any given instance is determined by its craft and contextualization. This was the point about the “two voices,” that different handlings of language are put in play with or against each other. There is no strictly concrete or literal language use since the structure of language is allegorical and performative.

There is another passage toward the end of “A”-5—involving a child pressing his forehead against a tree trunk (131-132/19)—that gets rewritten in “A”-6 and which I will discuss in that context. For the moment, while I have spoken of this revision across movements as a basic bonding technique for a modernist, non-narrative long poem, we can now see more clearly that this is not a simple self-allusive technique. If the recycling of phrases and words recalls us to their previous instances, it is also to indicate their iterative quality, that they are always available for reuse without necessarily dragging specific context along with them. In other words, all writing is rewriting, and after these early movements (after “A”-7) Zukofsky will more literally incorporate this principle into his practice and almost nothing of the later “A” is not in some sense reworked from found materials.

#### “A”-6

While continuing the loose dialog framework with Kay, “A”-6 also marks the first of those abrupt expansions that characterize the first half of “A”; whereas individual movements have averaged 3-5 pages, now there is a jump to 18 pages, which will be followed up by “A”-8 (63 pages) and “A”-12 (135 pages). This is just one aspect of the formal unpredictability of “A”, as Zukofsky makes none of the usual concessions to subdividing the poem into digestible units. In this case, the expansion can be accounted for in part as the consequence of turning outward to take in the social, which thus far has been largely gestured at, although in the end it is more a matter of the poet registering the challenge than offering a solution. As we have seen there are various indications in the previous movement of the social that the poet wants his poem to include, but here it becomes substantially more prominent with the consequence

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<sup>34</sup> Williams, *Selected Essays* (New Directions, 1954): 113-120. Peter Quartermain argues that this essay was a collaborative job with Zukofsky, but in any case the correspondence does indicate that many of Zukofsky’s responses were incorporated into the final version. See Quartermain, *Disjunctive Poetics* (1992): 67, 102; and *WCW/LZ* 38-45, 47-50.

that the poem's formal resources are strained. This movement consists of roughly two halves with the pivot marked by a lyric we will examine momentarily. The first half attempts to bring together or fill out the exchange on poetics with Kay and is heavily marked by recycled materials, while the latter half moves outward, much of it structured by a cross-country trip to visit the real-life Kay—so, geographically speaking, the ongoing dialog stretches to take in the entire country and other voices encountered along the way.

Like "A"-5 this movement is replete with repeats, particularly for the first few pages, and we have already examined the Eveline-Wrigley's passage as part of a series of rewritings. We might pause over another example that primarily regurgitates key images from "A"-4 summarizing the tradition of the Jewish fathers: their home is wherever they put their hats, tessellation, the Speech, a Wall (133/22). Here these images are spoken from the perspective of the children, and therefore are negated: "The Speech no longer spoken and not even a Wall to worship." Of particular interest is the literal irruption of the sea into these images so that this rejection of tradition is enacted as the sea breaking up the tessellation like grains of sand washed by the ebb and flow of the waves. A laundering image is introduced (from the passage in "A"-5 playing on laundering and the immaculate conception (131/19)), rendering the Wall or Speech or tradition of the fathers "a blank and washed over," in preparation for being rewritten. Yet this cannot be a "blank" slate any more than new creation is ever an immaculate conception. The sea scrambles or reshuffles the tessellated pebbles for reassemblage: "Tradition's pebbles, the mouth full"—which is what Zukofsky is doing in these lines rearranged from a previous context. So we are hardly surprised that this leads straight into an explicit evocation of fugal form. Again one can emphasize how the prior presentation of the fathers' tradition is rewritten or how the rewriting necessarily carries on its inheritances.

I want to consider three passages in the first half of "A"-6: the explicit introduction of Spinoza into the poem, the original "Objectivists" statement, and a passage on history. A few pages in there is the introduction of Spinoza's famous definition of a dynamic Nature: "Nature as creator, / [...] / Nature as created" (134/22-23)—in other words, Nature by definition creates and what it creates is itself, the ceaseless dialectical process whereby Nature persists. Zukofsky then draws out an obvious implication: anyone creates as "a mode of these inertial systems"—the term "mode" is another indication of the Spinozian source of these ideas.<sup>35</sup> This is to say, one creates as a participant in and thus as determined by Nature (Spinoza is a strict determinist), how and what one creates is determined by Nature's need to perpetuate itself which is simultaneously the perpetuation of oneself as a participant in Nature. All of this, it should be obvious, is readily translatable into socio-historical terms, as Spinoza's God or Nature is simply the material and social totality. In "A"-2 Zukofsky metaphorically designated this totality as the sea, and here he adds the equivalent term "environs," which in the revised text is the first word of the movement: "Environs, always the sea of —," and, if it is not already obvious, the blank is filled in on the following page as "necessity." Our experience or perception is always a mode or modification of the totality (substance). So in the Spinoza passage we have a list-like summary of what the poet is dealing with: the environs or the sea, ears as doors to that sea (sensory impressions), and words. This final item is "Lost — visible," succinctly indicating the poet's situatedness in the totality, where one must deal with what is visible or perceptible, while aware that the vast bulk is lost, beyond knowing—or, alternatively, one might read this latter pair as mimicking the flux of the sea in which we perceive the world or words as seen and lost.

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<sup>35</sup> "By Mode I understand the Modifications of a substance or that which is in something else through which it may be conceived." Spinoza, *Ethics* Part I, Def. 6, trans. Andrew Boyle (Everyman's Library, 1910).

Although Zukofsky brings in some fairly weighty backup for his poetics, this comes down to simply insisting that poetry must recognize itself as participating in rather than transcendent of its material and socio-historical circumstances. This means poetry must work with specifics, what is seen or heard, rather than from a priori conceptions, with the understanding that any specifics relate to an infinite “lost.” Essentially this continues the central theme of the debate with Kay—in “A”-2 Kay insists on “clear music” while the poet counters with the sea that “crowds [...] in upon us” (118), which leads immediately into the catalog of things or textual bits churned up by the sea. In a move that will be characteristic throughout “A”, Zukofsky at this point in “A”-6 switches to a deliberately trivial Einstein anecdote—asked a typical journalistic question as to the secret of his success, Einstein responds that his “formula” is work, play and shut up. Like any of us, this “genius” simply does what he does, and also, like any of us, the poem too must play as well as work. But perhaps the real point of this anecdote is the silliness of the question in the first place, and by implication the effort to formulate a poetics via Spinoza, or at least the danger of veering into philosophical earnestness. The abrupt intrusion of the seemingly irrelevant, trivial or silly is something that will persist in “A” over the decades. Nevertheless, Einstein and contemporary physics is a recurring presence in “A”, particularly “A”-8, and the juxtaposition here with Spinoza is significant. Both Spinoza and Einstein propose that anyone is necessarily actively inside larger systems on which one can never gain an outside or transcendent perspective.

However, if Spinoza provides some philosophical backing for Zukofsky’s poetics, we should not lose sight of the fact that Spinoza’s definition of Nature is a model for the poem itself. Nature as self-interacting, creating itself out of itself, is essentially a fugal model. We have already stressed how the repeats in the early movements function less as allusions in the usual sense than as indications that the poem is necessarily an act of rewriting and reworking itself within a larger totality that is persistently remaking itself. We will see how “A”-7 brings all this to a culmination.

After a couple more pages (a good deal of which was cut out in revision), we encounter the origins of the “Objectivists” statement on poetics, a handful of lines that Zukofsky will rejig as the now famous opening of “Program: ‘Objectivists’ 1931” for *Poetry* magazine (*Prep.* 189). Notably Zukofsky introduces his definitions of “an objective” as his “other” voice. The overriding idea throughout these early pages of “A”-6 is that his one song incorporates two or many voices. In the original version it is clearer that this “other” voice that announces the definitions of “an objective” counters “my one voice,” that is, a more conventional musical or lyrical conception of poetry, Kay’s “clear music,” with Mozart standing in as an exemplar (136/24). While Mozart’s melody was apt for his century, it is hardly so for a poet writing out of 20<sup>th</sup> century New York City. The “A”-6 version of the definitions of “an objective” explicitly alludes back to the previous Spinoza passage, which might help elucidate that well-known phrase, “desire / for what is objectively perfect / Inextricably the direction of historic and / contemporary particulars” (136/24). This is Spinozian desire (“Nature as creator”), the “endeavor to persist in its being,” Nature creating and being created, and in that endeavor one strives for perfection, which for Spinoza is the same as maximum power or reality. Spinoza is adamantly anti-teleological, these are not achieved or achievable states, but activities of persisting, of maximizing oneself—one cannot define beforehand what “perfect” would be but it is necessarily implicit in whatever one does. But again that potential is defined and determined by the totality, “the direction of historical and contemporary particulars.” What “perfection” might look or feel like, we will get to in a moment. In the contributors’ notes to the “Objectivists” issue of *Poetry* (Feb. 1931), Zukofsky states that “A” “includes two themes: I—desire for the poetically perfect finding its direction inextricably the direction of historic and contemporary particulars; and II—approximate attainment of this perfection in the feeling of the contrapuntal design of the

[fugue] transferred to poetry; both themes related to the text of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*" (294). Perfection, as far as this poem is concerned, is approximate and an affect of fugal form. This should help us read lines that crop up here and there, such as "Those loved seeking their own completion, in a voice, their / own voice sounding—" (132/21). Love here is again Spinozian desire, the desire for completion (perfection, power, reality) as a voice that is necessarily part of and participant in the voice that is Nature. In this particular formulation, the emphasis is on finding one's voice as a sense of being with others; indeed, the individual voice is recognizable and realizable only with and against others. At the same time this is clearly enough a fugal model.

We should finally note the term "particulars"—equivalent to Spinoza's "particular things" or any complex of bodies. In the "Objectivists" program, Zukofsky gave a sample list of such "particulars": a pulled-glass bottle, a performance of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* or the Russian Revolution and the rise of metallurgical plants in Siberia (*Prep.* 189). Of these, only Bach's *Passion* is mentioned here in "A"-6 (although the Russian Revolution and the metallurgical plants appear later on), but the point is that anything or any constellation of things, including their extension in time, is a particular. Worth noting is that there is no inherent hierarchy implied among particulars—any particular can be brought into relation with any other, so the pulled-glass bottle with the Russian Revolution (this bottle is itself of course a textual item pulled out of a poem by Marianne Moore). Zukofsky makes the point by giving a peculiar anecdote apparently overheard on the train about Napoleon sending a barrel of body parts or perhaps specifically male genitals to Italy as a warning (137/25). This enters the poem as yet another of those abrupt oddities by which Zukofsky insists on disrupting readers' expectations or complacency. In this case, apparently, the overheard Napoleon anecdote (probably apocryphal) is being used to construct a historical interpretation. The point is that particulars are whatever out of which you construct larger constructs or conceptions, which are both modified or disrupted by more particulars and become themselves particulars. The latter point is important to keep in mind, so if Spinoza's *Ethics* are used to illuminate and authorize Zukofsky's poetics, it is not some absolute foundation, but rather a particular that can be used or sited in any number of ways. If a bit of the *Ethics* threatens to become too abstract and dogmatic, then juxtapose it with a decidedly light anecdote about Einstein. The voices, mine and others, out of which the poet constructs his song-poem are particulars, which is itself a particular that necessarily grows out of and participates with and in other songs or voices (or readers).

At one point early in "A"-6 Zukofsky appears to directly refer to these incongruous juxtapositions, which, so he seems to imply, are inherent in the fugal model. He offers a conventional enough version of his two voices, the head and the heart, the former "climbing" and the latter visually descending on the page, but both are measures that while moving outward should do so together (132-133/21). He then suggests this relationship is like a "mutual slap" that jars people awake from a tiredness that is a general entropic propensity toward sameness, a failure to notice differences. We might discern here something like Shklovsky's *ostranenie* (estrangement), the aesthetic as a means of renewal against the inexorable forces of the routine or inertia. The suggestion is that this conception of the fugal model includes such incongruity, which I would argue is the reminder that any given segment of text is constantly open to reframing or rewriting.

My third passage in the first half of "A"-6 begins, "The common air includes..." (139/26-27). Except for the second line, all of this passage through, "'So that,' 'and'—," is adapted straight out of Zukofsky's long essay on Pound's *The Cantos* written the previous year, dealing specifically with Pound's collage treatment of history (*Prep.* 77). In his essay Zukofsky is defending Pound against the inevitable accusations of willful and arbitrary juxtaposition and thus distortion of history in *The Cantos*. What interests Zukofsky is the

integrity of the particulars and their collocations which he compares to film: “Lines, flash of photoplay” (original version). The emphasis is on spatial contingency without overriding narratives, any particular implies relations with all others—“Events listening to their own tremors”—any particular sounds through the totality. Given our discussion of Spinoza with his emphasis on phenomenological density, on everything impinging on everything else, we can see how this fits with Zukofsky’s general perspective. Here, though, this view of history is clearly a writing practice, the “common” spatial field of the textual page that requires no more explanatory connections than a seemingly arbitrary “so that” or “and”—the conjunctions that end Cantos I and II respectively. Obviously as presented here, this applies equally to his own poem conceived as a mutual space in which particulars can freely come into collocations without being subordinated to a hierarchizing logic. Predictably, in his essay Zukofsky largely ignores Pound’s mythopoetics, the latter’s attempts to close those open conjunctions, instead focusing on technique, and he will not be impressed by the trajectory of *The Cantos* over the course of the 1930s as the poem becomes increasingly caught up in historical argument, not to mention suspect political allegiances.

The structural mid-point of “A”-6 is marked by a lyric, quite Williamsesque in manner complete with redeemed refuse (140/27-28), which I would suggest is another instance of serial rewriting of the utopian passage at the center of “A”-1. Writing to Pound, Zukofsky stated this lyric was a paraphrase of “Dies Irae” (*EP/LZ* 80), but if so it is an inversion, the utopian morning after the Day of Wrath and Judgment. This is appropriate given that the *St. Matthew Passion* speaks of the agony and death of Christ, but its effect, as recorded in the matching lyric in “A”-1, is this narrative’s implied counterpoint in which we see the world as if redeemed. The earlier passage in “A”-1 is composed under the aura of Bach’s *Passion*, before its effects wear off, and as noted the degraded cityscape is transformed into identifiably conventional rural imagery: “playing / Into fields and forgetting to die, / The streets smoothed over as fields, / Not even the friction of wheels, / Feet off ground: / As beyond effort, playing” (115-116/4). First of all we can now read this in Spinozian terms so that the aesthetic effect of Bach’s music realizes a moment of perfection, of maximum existence, so that while the poet is necessarily a mode of inertial systems, he experiences this as absolute freedom, beyond effort and mortality. If in one sense this is illusory, in another it is what we always necessarily strive to realize by our nature. If this moment is realized quite subjectively, it is necessarily dependent on the “environs,” a harmonization with the material and social totality which here literally transforms itself. In “A”-1 this moment is overtly idealistic and aesthetic, a levitation off the ground. In “A”-6 the lyric begins in similar fashion with images of morning, rose and lily. But as the poet looks, imagined as reading the rose or the palm of his hand, he sees refuse scattered on the ground: gravel, burnt matches, glass, disused rubber—the degraded specifics of the world which nonetheless are formally and perceptually redeemed in lyrical manner. Whereas previously the poet experienced his feet rising off the earth, here his heels scarp the ground but without tripping, and then the lyric concludes with the reaffirmation that one will never see anything more than particulars—a refrain that has recurred a number of times since it was announced in the “objective” definition passage.<sup>36</sup> Again, an insistence on particulars, that is the material world, implies an egalitarian acceptance and recognition of all particulars, one cannot simply pick and choose. Consequently, as with Spinoza, this brings in society and politics: one’s self-realization or freedom is dependent on everyone’s relative self-realization and power.

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<sup>36</sup> This insistence on keeping one’s feet on the ground can be compared with the moment in “A”-19 where the poet swerves from accepting Mallarmé’s conception of a universe of pure speech: “I’d rather not / preempt my / horse from / actual pavement / or green” (422).

An odd detail in this pivotal lyric is the mention of glasses, indeed in the original the poet refers to himself as “Rimbaud / with glasses” (140/27). This refers back to a passage near the end of “A”-5 in which we similarly encounter non-urban imagery—fields and trees, birds, violets, sunlight—and an apparent sense of expansiveness, yet oddly punctuated by a more troubling image of a child with forehead pressed against bark (131-132/19). Here too Rimbaud is named and quoted, “plein de rouges tourmentes” (= “forehead / tormented red”) from “Les Chercheuses de poux” (The Seekers of Lice).<sup>37</sup> I understand this image as the intensity of the desire for contact, for unmediated connection with the real and others, or similarly the desire to get beyond what is taken for granted. The oddity of this passage is the mention of glasses—in the original, “no glasses stopping from bark touch,” which thankfully in revision lost its poetic awkwardness, although it is quite possible Zukofsky meant this as mocking his younger poetical self. In any case it certainly is a self-referential detail, and of course reading and identifying with Rimbaud is irresistible for any adolescent poet. However, in the passage we have been considering in “A”-6 these missing glasses reappear on his nose. Glasses are a type of objective, lens that focus refracted light, but also in this instance objective in the sense of distancing. The conception of poetry is no longer direct expression or contact. So whereas the utopian lyric passage in “A”-1 was an expression of passive aesthetic effect rising somewhat above the ground, here in “A”-6 it is a matter of perception (so in this sense Rimbaud is an appropriate allusion) and literally seeing what is strewn on the ground differently (actively in a Spinozian sense), as compositional particulars rather than inert waste.

The latter half of “A”-6 consists largely of various particulars primarily of a social or historical character as the poet enlarges his idea of what the poem needs to register. However, the insistence on particulars immediately poses the problem of how the poet or the poem can conceptualize the social or history other than as the churning contingency of the sea. Zukofsky does not disguise that at this point he is presenting little more than a catalog of materials, not essentially different from those we have seen previously except that they consist of larger pieces with a more explicit socio-historical content. The second half of “A”-6 is organized in a deliberately rough manner, chunks of material, usually vignettes or sound bites, in loose groups indicated by repeated tag phrases, which progress from “the time was:” (141-145/28-32), to “was advised:” or “was told:” (145-147/33-34) and then finally, “achieved:” (147-148/34-35). These possibly indicate a comical educational process underpinned by the poet’s cross-country trip. So first he makes a number of observations on contemporary society (“the time was”) which particularly note instances of class—frivolous activities of the wealthy or class pretenses—punctuated by the first couple of mentions of Lenin and the Russian Revolution, indicating tremors that threaten the apparent veneer of stability (143, 144/30, 32). Then the poet sets off on his trip in the course of which he records several examples of folksy political and economic observation (“was advised/told”), accented by a couple instances of “Asunder!” which echo without quoting the more apocalyptic notes of the *St. Matthew Passion*, presumably hinting at the Russian Revolution. But still, this apocalyptic gesture is so arch it is difficult not to take it as self-consciously melodramatic. And then “Achieved:” seems to allude in the first instance to the poet having made it to the West coast (hitchhiking) and then back to New York (by train), but also as an ironic judgment on what he has seen of America or what the nation seems to have “achieved.” A fair percentage of these latter two groupings (“was advised” and “achieved”) have an

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<sup>37</sup> There are not many foreign language quotations in the early movements but all with one exception disappear in revision, either erased or translated, as in this case. The “Objectivists” *Poetry* issue included a couple poems by Rimbaud translated by Emanuel Carnevali, which came via Pound’s connections.

economic motif, but typically there are sundry more nonsensical materials thrown in as well and it is difficult to corral the whole into a neat argument or point of view. Arriving in San Francisco the poet reads in a newspaper (a paradigm for randomly contingent information) that “Some of our best and largest dowagers / almost do the split” and then presumably an ad for “Sing Fat Co. — merchants” (147/35). One wonders whether the former is from a bit of doggerel but in any case it seems to be a ludicrous image of society ballet dancing or some such activity, while the latter is a case where the transliteration of the Cantonese name has for Zukofsky an irresistible musical ring. But at the same time the Chinese name combined with standing at the edge of the continent causes an associative leap across the Pacific to mention of the early activities of the Communists in southern China, which presumably is being reported in the same newspaper. The latter is all the more notable in that at this time very little was known in the West about the Communists in China (this is well before the Long March of 1934-1936), and what little was reported was invariably in terms of banditry—“roving Red bands” as in the newspaper article that is Zukofsky’s source.<sup>38</sup> The poet’s journey cross-country sees him looking out westward from land’s end where he notes revolutionary activities to complement those seen to the east in Russia, which provides one framework to assess his more local observations. At this point, however, this is merely hinted at, although Zukofsky may already conceptually have “A”-8 in mind, which directly deals with socio-historical materials to present a depiction and response to contemporary world history.<sup>39</sup>

While one can easily enough presume basic allegiances—pro-Lenin, anti-upper class indulgences—many of the particulars of the latter half of “A”-6 are difficult to assess, and, at least at this point, the poem does not offer a very clear framework for doing so. I have already suggested that Zukofsky’s discursive relativism deliberately undermines the temptation toward judgment, although admittedly this comes under considerable socio-political pressure, especially during the period of the 1930s. A telling instance in “A”-6 is the appearance of a series of quotations by Henry Ford scattered across either side of the utopian lyric I have designated as the middle point of the movement. The natural tendency is to assume that Ford is a type of arrogant capitalist, a companion figure to Magnus of “A”-1, who in fact reappears twice here in connection with Ford (140-141, 142/28, 30). Yet the extended sound bites by Ford are a very mixed bag—certainly paternalistic and evidencing the blind spots with regard to labor one would expect from a capitalist employer (and precisely at this point (137/25) the poet parenthetically interpolates his own corrective reading), but as he rattles along he says that industry and culture are interconnected and that culture should be part of everyday practice rather than a rarified activity, as well as expressing a number of other sensible pragmatic views. The point is that Zukofsky could have easily emphasized Ford’s rightest politics or even his anti-Semitism but chooses to present him as a more complexly ambiguous character.<sup>40</sup> Indeed, Ford was perfectly willing in the name of business to assist the Soviets in

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<sup>38</sup> In official Chinese discourse even today, “banditry” and “hooliganism” are standard designations for anti-establishment political activity.

<sup>39</sup> China is mentioned there in passing as well (94.30). One can trace a slim but continuous attention to revolutionary activities in China from these early passing references in “A”-6 and -8, through “A”-10’s allusion to the Long March (117-118) to a reworking of a translation of a Mao Zedong poem that is used as a counterpoint to a Stalin passage in “A”-12 (204-205). The last mention of revolutionary China in “A” is a reference to writing reform in “A”-13 (300).

<sup>40</sup> Much later, Zukofsky will offer a similarly mixed portrait of Stalin in “A”-12 (203-204), a collage of quotations that are difficult to adjudicate whether they are to be read as symptomatically critical of or slyly defending the Soviet leader. In any case they studiously avoid mention of any of the more obvious crimes one might expect, even while Stalin is in the end compared unfavourably to Mao Zedong.

setting up automobile factories around the time “A”-6 was composed, and from Lenin on the Soviet leadership were enthusiastic supporters of Fordism to rapidly modernize and reconstruct their economy. It is perhaps worth mentioning that a few years later in his essay on Charlie Chaplin, “*Modern Times*,” Zukofsky criticizes the films of the surrealists and René Clair for their overly predictable satire or “attitude,” preaching to the converted so to speak (*Prep.* 59), and Zukofsky’s own depiction of Magnus in “A”-1 could have come straight out of one of Clair’s films.

In the last few pages of the movement, with the poet back home in New York City, there are three main segments: an extended scene among friends, apparently on Staten Island, with singing of various traditional songs, then the poet takes a date out to see Connie’s Hot Chocolates, a musical revue exploiting the craze for Harlem-style entertainment, which then leads into some reflections on Bach’s “Kaffee Cantata.” Particularly if we see these pages as bookending the early movements before the bravura performance of “A”-7, the emphasis on popular musical forms injects an interesting counterpoint to the massive sacred work with which the whole sequence began and which supposedly has been the formal analogy for the poem itself. But by now we should not be surprised by this propensity to complicate and reframe matters, so the musical models for Zukofsky’s poem as well as of what is fugal are not allowed to ossify. These more popular exemplars are not brought in as degraded examples found wanting against more “serious” works of the past. They may be better or worse, but here it is significant that the more highbrow and popular forms always intermingle and work off of each other. The repeated remark that Bach always “stands up” does assert that his work stands the test of time better than most, but also leads directly into mention of the “Kaffee Cantata” as a popular example of his work intended to be fun, “a kind of ‘Hot Chocolates’” (150/37). Again we have this fugal reframing, the high counterbalanced by the low, each necessarily implying each other in the regenerative process of working with and against each other.

The movement then concludes with two questions. First of all whether “The design / Of the fugue” can be adapted to poetry, which as we suggested has already been answered in the preceding and will be answered again differently with “A”-7—the latter’s centrifugal concentration counterpointing the comparatively loose sprawl of the preceding movements. Indeed, the question immediately prompts the poem into a small fugal flourish: first we have mention of evening in the form of a quotation from the *Passion* libretto (repeating the opening line of “A”-3), then Venus, the evening star, rising, with all her manifold implications of beauty and the aesthetic. Again, Zukofsky condenses these lines in revision which originally read: “*At eventide, cool hour of rest / Who rests? / That is Venus come up!*” (151/38). “Eventide” also echoes the line, “the courses we tide from” from “A”-4 and -5, while the mention of “rests” immediately countered by the question emphasizes dialectical dynamism. In the mention of Venus we might detect an allusion to the end of Canto I, where a fragmentary bit of the Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite gestures at the objective of the Odyssean poet’s endeavors. But the instant Zukofsky begins ascending toward literariness and transcendence, he abruptly returns to earth with the image of his mother’s grave and shoes repeated from “A”-5. So we have an enactment of the *Passion*/resurrection motif, but if we detect mythopoetics here it is buried in the formal action of the poem itself, and the conventional sequencing, while logically circular, has been reversed so that we end up on the ground with the requisite footwear. This then leads immediately into the second question as to “what distinction” this various material—Kay’s “offal”—might lead to. This latter question echoes an earlier line, speaking of particulars: “But we are after all realists capable of distinctions” (137/25). This latter sense of “distinction” is probably more useful, even while the poet is also asking himself what he is able to achieve. However, he has effectively set in place an approach to the answer that does not depend on proposing a specific argument

or viewpoint on culture, history or politics. Rather the formal design and interplay attempts to maintain the poem as an action, which will be even further foregrounded in the immediately following “A”-7.

In the original version Zukofsky ties in the transition between these movements more explicitly by adding a truncated response to the second question, so the final lines read:

With all this material?

To what distinction,

Horses, she saw?

My — (152/38)

which then leads immediately into “A”-7 whose first word is “Horses.” The initial mention of horses here is as if it were a glimpse, something encountered randomly as one goes about the ordinary business of the day or similarly mentioned in conversation, but then becomes as good a place as any to start or continue a poem. We have here an explicit shift from horses as referent to the poet’s “horses” as a word and a poem. There is also a typical Zukofskian play on seeing—what do we see when we see an image? a referent (she saw) or a word (the poet saw or heard)? But of course the horses that are about to appear in “A”-7 are “sawhorses.” Apparently, perhaps overestimating his readers, Zukofsky felt such clues were unnecessary by the time he made his revisions or else simply could not stop the itch to delete and condense.

“A”-7

Arguably the pivotal work of Zukofsky’s entire career, “A”-7 is the first poem that cannot be imagined as composed by any other poet at this time.<sup>41</sup> However, our previous discussion allows us to see how “A”-7 is a logical culmination of the preceding movements rather than an abrupt change of tack. This set of seven sonnets is the first of a series of major poems that counter-intuitively work within restrictive late medieval forms to produce highly modernist compositions. These include “Mantis” (sestina), the concluding ballade of “A”-8, “A”-9 (canzone) and “A”-11 (ballata). Looking forward to the intermittent continuation of “A” over the next two decades (through “A”-12), we note that “A”-7 begins a pattern of alternating formally restrictive with more expansive collage movements, although characteristically Zukofsky is not dogmatic about this—so the collagist “A”-8 concludes with a ballade and “A”-10 loosely fits its wide ranging, documentary style response to the fall of France into parts determined by the ordinariness of the Latin mass (on the pattern of Bach’s *Mass in B minor*). The essential point is diversity of forms and their dynamic interaction.

In “A”-1 Zukofsky refers dismissively to “the sonneteers” in a passage broadly satirizing the superficiality of “high culture” reception (115/3). Despite the apparent ascendancy of free verse in the aftermath of World War I, there remained plenty of such sonneteers and traditionalists who continued to dominate poetry prizes and sales.<sup>42</sup> Although for Williams and others the sonnet was a defunct form, it has had a curious persistence throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, even among innovative American poets, notably Ted Berrigan and Bernadette Mayer. For the latter the sonnet is apparently a poem of more or less 14 lines

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<sup>41</sup> Zukofsky himself refers to “A”-7 in such terms in “A”-12 (1951): “—Look, Paul, where / The sawhorses of ‘A’-7 / Have brought me” (228). “A”-7 was first published as Zukofsky’s contribution to the “Objectivists” issue of *Poetry* (Feb. 1931).

<sup>42</sup> Zukofsky’s first publication in a major journal, *Poetry* (1924), was a sonnet, and he would publish at least five more in 1928-1930, none of which survived into his book collections.

designated as a sonnet, the necessary latter gesture then puts the poem into play against various assumptions of the tradition, both formally and thematically. In Zukofsky's own time, the primary practitioner of sonnets that he would have considered relevant was E.E. Cummings, who usually adhered to conventional sonnet forms and themes, jazzed up in Cummings style. Zukofsky's adoption of the sonnet for "A"-7 is an entirely different matter, and he is not attempting to modernize the genre nor using it to ironically play off its tradition.

Without being pointed out, few readers would immediately recognize that "A"-7 is a set of sonnets, superficially adhering to the traditional demands of pentameter lines and appropriate rhyme schemes (except for the sestet of the final sonnet which abandons rhyme altogether). Zukofsky obscures this fact by sometimes presenting the octaves and sestets as distinct units, so overall we have a variety of 14-, 8-, and 6-line stanzas. Furthermore, with the last two sonnets the integrity of the sonnet units, both internally and externally, breaks down, and the syntax runs over the octave and sestet, as well as between the final two sonnets themselves. But the primary point of attack is on the language and particularly the meter. Whereas rhetorical sonority and involution is almost the sine non qua of the traditional sonnet, building up complex hypotactic sentences, Zukofsky breaks up his lines and constructions into short, repetitive phrases which become increasingly manic as the movement proceeds. The verse tends to constantly stutter and circle rather than building to the discursive and witty climaxes typical of sonnets, although as we will see there is a development of sorts over the course of the set of sonnets. As technical exercises there is no particular virtuosity displayed here since Zukofsky's dismissal of meter, eschewal of grammatical or syntactical norms and lack of a developed argument means there is little challenge fitting into the pre-determined form, although there are some amusingly unusual rhymes. In adopting this form, Zukofsky is not evoking the tradition of the sonnet for authorization nor for resonance, in other words, its generic significations are insignificant. It is as if he is trying to think back to the original impulse that created the sonnet form in the first place, that is, the form functions in order to help generate the poem. This is the burden of free verse, which means the formal principles must be reconsidered for each poem, not as a question of selecting this or that form, or allowing the poem to excrete its form in a supposedly organic fashion, but that the implications of form must be recognized as integral to whatever the poem is saying and doing. In other words, "A"-7 is a thoroughly free verse poem and is only conceivable within that field of possibilities. For Williams, the sonnet comes with too much dead weight, too many automated significations which interfere with the possibilities for the poetry he is intent on opening up. Zukofsky takes a different perspective on the question, which he articulates in a fashion in "'Mantis,' An Interpretation," in large measure responding directly to Williams' objections. Zukofsky's adoption of the quintessential fixed poetic form in the English tradition is appropriate for a poem so self-consciously concerned with textual recycling. Yet he seems to have avoided any of those automated sonnet associations Williams so distrusted, to the point that the fact these are formal sonnets seems irrelevant. The repeated sonnet form of "A"-7 functions to generate the compacted and self-turning manner of the poem.

In reading this poem it is usual to recover the basic scenario, even though it requires some effort to separate it out from the busy barrage of fractured verbiage. The poet is sitting on a stoop in a urban neighborhood contemplating a number of sawhorses marking off an area of road work, which he proceeds to animate, bringing them to life as horses and setting them dancing.<sup>43</sup> This neatly recalls the resurrection motif implied by Bach's *St. Matthew*

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<sup>43</sup> Commentators tend to assume matter-of-factly that the setting of "A"-7 is Depression era, the primary evidence being the reiterated phrase "month's rent in arrear" and "Brother, we want a meal"—although the latter is echoed from "A"-1. Zukofsky's class and employment background

*Passion*, now displaced into aesthetic creation, and in that sense can be taken as an affirmative realization of Bach's work as poetry in the present. This resurrection or transubstantiation motif now becomes secularized as a vision of the world as human and historical, seeing the object world as transformable. At the center of this vision is labor, signaled by the sawhorses even though the workmen are currently absent. This anticipates the primary theme of "A"-8 announced in its first lines, in which the light of labor will be seen as everywhere present, and seen as such is redeemable from the machinations of exchange value and forms the basis for the world's common ownership. However, focusing narrowly on "A"-7 as reworking the mythopoetics of the *St. Matthew Passion* has its limits, reducing the poem to a willful act of romantic imagination on the one hand and making tendentiously exaggerated claims for its social analysis on the other.

Zukofsky in fact attempts to head off this reading and emphasizes in both the first and last lines "words" that are made "out of airs"—meaning both nothing and music. "A"-7 does not rely on mythopoetics, nor on allusion; it does not have an argument or even a theme that is developed. The essential method of the poem is the recycling of words, which is what words in any case necessarily do in order to signify. The poet deploys metaphor and analogy, punning, half-punning and rhyme, metonymy. The difficulty is that all of these are in play at the same time, rather than being hierarchically ordered. It is the generation of the poem, its multi-trajectory figuration that is the substance of the poem rather than any base referent. The poem of course does refer, but all over the place. Figurally the poem can fold out in any direction. One could say there is a simultaneous centrifugal and centripetal movement—the poem turns inward, repeating and creating out of itself, yet those repeats are always necessarily different and accumulate other external materials and significations. Through the first two thirds, "A"-7 predominately recycles itself and becomes progressively more antic, reaching a climax in the octave of the fifth sonnet where the verse verges into percussive sound poetry. This then calms down somewhat with the sestet of the fifth offering the clearest description of the sawhorses as such, as if returning to a ground of verisimilitude only for the poem to crank up again. The sixth and seventh sonnets introduce a high proportion of recycled bits from previous movements, so "A"-7 expands itself to interrelate with the entire set of early movements—the sea and what floats over it, laundering, (Virgin) Mary, leaf on leaf, liveforever, flower, Ricky, Shimaunu-Sân, clavicembalo, Rose the Glass Broken (an erased repeat), my two voices, offal, "we want a meal," "*Open, O fierce flaming pit!*"—every previous movement, as well as itself, is echoed.

The action of the poem, its reading, happens as a circulation or oscillation between the referent, its figure and its figuration—by the latter I mean the self-reflective pointing to itself as a verbal construct. The text strands these layers of signification so that it is quite impossible to rest with or determine a fixed ground. If the scenario, which is also the theme of the poem, is the composition of the poem from the observation of sawhorses, exemplifying the fallen material world, the actual reading of the poem hardly allows us to stabilize the poem in this manner, as it methodically directs our attention to its figuring process. We necessarily start with words, but reading immediately cancels mere words. In one sense this is a familiar instance of obstructing reading through the words and closing off the street, so to speak, or more exactly marking off an area of work. If the poem depicts the poet exercising his powers of imagination on the real as given, of animating this still-life, this is not an

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hardly required the onset of the Depression for him to situate himself in a setting of economic straits, and there is nothing in "A"-7 that is not perfectly autobiographical at any time in his early life when he typically struggled to pay the rent. Economic have-nots are introduced into "A" at the outset, before the Crash of 1929, and were in any case common empathetic material in popular culture, notably the cinema in which destitute characters were depicted by major stars of the silent era, such as Mary Pickford and Charlie Chaplin (both of whom grew up experiencing the real thing).

exercise in arbitrary freedom, of mere will (which Spinoza so trenchantly dismisses) but must acknowledge the givens of its materials and labor. As previously argued, Zukofsky conceives of the poet as realizing his power or reality through active self-making in the world, which is always necessarily an encounter with limitations and obstruction, the impetus not only for more activity but for ethics and politics. But Zukofsky is less interested in representing or commenting on the state of society than on activating a complex engagement that is necessarily coterminous with what any of us necessarily do in living.

The engaged reader is lured into this verbal contraption, not by the presentation of an alternative fiction but by the active movement between the words themselves, which I would suggest stands as analogous to the poet's experience in the opening passage of "A"—the effect of listening to the polyvocal *St. Matthew Passion*. As Bob Perelman has pointed out, the music of "A"-7 is exceedingly peculiar, and I have suggested it is to a significant degree motivated by an anti-sonnet impulse.<sup>44</sup> Nonetheless it is a good exemplar in the context of "A", where, as I have been at some pains to point out, we should not expect some melodious (Mozartian) ideal but a high degree of dissonance, abrupt shifts of register and generally a compulsive reframing or displacing of any given utterance. This results from the incessant impingement of the outside, of the sea. If music implies, at least as Zukofsky tends to deploy the metaphor, an assumption of wholeness or completeness, it is only in the sense that everything relates—or, to put this differently, as a desire for perfection that is adamantly non-teleological, never an imaginable or achievable endpoint or state but something like the impulse for design itself. Within this textual environment the reader is activated and activist, negotiating the gaps and relations according to their need for a sense of dynamic balance, a Spinozian need to endure that is a desire for power or reality – power is a maximized efficiency in processing complexity or "intelligence working itself out in the concrete [...] inventive existence interacting with other existence in all its ramifications" (*Prep.* 60).<sup>45</sup>

By now the recycling manner of "A"-7 ought to be apparent enough, so I will not further test the reader's patience by painstaking demonstration. However, it is worth examining an odd few lines near the end:

each face as  
Of a Sea looking Outward (Rose the Glass  
Broken), Each a reflection of the other. (155/42)

That the sea and a flower appear here should not surprise us. If we try to recover verisimilitude, these faces are the red lanterns hanging on the ends of the sawhorses as night warning lights—thus the "rose" (a color, a noun, a verb). In any case, the faces reflecting each other, which may also be bits of broken glass, is an obvious image of the Zukofskian poem, whether conceived of as reflecting internally or externally. In other words, words connect. The familiar sea indicates everything, although this general implication is so embedded in our common usage as to hardly require that we recall "A"-2 to conjure this sense. We suggested that the sea as the repository of textuality flows through "A"-7, and here we have the familiar idea of the whole seen through a particular. "Faces" imply the poem or text itself to be read, and any face leads back out into the sea of which it is a part. Or, these faces are readers which necessarily imply and interrelate with other readers in reading. So this becomes another allegory for the dynamic, centripetal-centrifugal action of the poem.

Another point worth noting is the curious capitalization—there are various singularities of punctuation in "A"-7 but the overt unconventionality of capitalization in these

<sup>44</sup> Bob Perelman, "Zukofsky at 100 : Zukofsky as a Body of Work," *Radical Poetics and Secular Jewish Culture*, eds. Stephen Paul Miller & Daniel Morris (U of Alabama P, 2010): 46-47.

<sup>45</sup> On this matter one can usefully consider a dense Spinozian passage from *Bottom* that Zukofsky read into his lecture "About the Gas Age" (*Prep.* 171-172; from *Bottom* 423-424).

lines is unique. They suggest a title or titles, a possible title for this poem—“Rose the Glass / Broken” is a slightly fractured but appropriate title for a cubist painting. The image of broken glass is not a bad model for this poem which seems to demand that the reader strain to piece things back together, but which somehow never quite fit together into a focused picture or frame. But as much as anything, the capitalization foregrounds the signifying of such conventions, that they alter the possible readings, in other words another pointing to the words as words, another possibility that the sea throws up. The key point here is formal dynamism so that while the poem turns on itself it simultaneously draws in diverse relations from throughout the totality. The poem does not bring to focus an isolated image from out of the welter of the sea but constructs a dynamic set of relations and resonances that cannot be circumscribed.<sup>46</sup>

In considering “A”-7 as in key aspects paradigmatic of Zukofsky’s poetics, I want to quickly look at two other poems in which there is a similar prominence of the figure of circulation or centrifugal/centripetal movement that characterizes Zukofsky’s conception of a fugal form. As previously mentioned, “A”-4 opens with a discrete lyric that describes a carousel, presumably in an amusement park at night next to a river.<sup>47</sup> The turning lights of the carousel are reflected in the river, and this sets up a dynamic that turns simultaneously outward and inward that takes in various other lights—on the pier, hill, street—as well as reflecting back on the trees, carousel horses and in the water. This would obviously be another candidate for an animate still-life, but again highly cubist or fractured in presentation. Particularly the central figure of turning is a favorite model for the poem itself—a turning that takes in or reflects its surroundings or context while at the same time reflecting back on itself, or, alternatively, as recycling, writing as always rewriting. The poem feeds off of the seemingly random materials at hand (the sea, environs) as well as the active construction out of itself. I have argued this can be aligned with Spinoza’s Nature—simultaneously creative and created—and with fugal structure. One way to think of the fugal is as a spatialization complimenting the temporal progression of the work, a sense of density, self-reflection or enfolding within the progression of the work. Thus Zukofsky’s description to Pound of his intention in “A”-7: “[...] like two or three balls juggled in the air at once and the play got from the reflected lights in the colors of them balls—development being; not over a space” (*EP/LZ* 80).

A somewhat enigmatic later poem, *Anew* 29 (“Glad they were there”) (*CSP* 93) from 1938, appears to describe a couple dancing in a green field, although deliberately abstracted and there is a decided geometric emphasis (angles, ovals). Zukofsky drew particular attention to this seemingly slight poem by appending notes in the form of four quotations from rather formidable sources: Dante, Marx, Lorentz and Cavalcanti (*CSP* 103-104). I have always thought these notes function somewhat like those Pound added to his rendition of Li Po (Li Bai), “The Jewel Stairs’ Grievance,” as a succinct lesson in reading Imagist poems.<sup>48</sup> We can

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<sup>46</sup> I have studiously avoided bringing in Zukofsky’s formulations of “Objectivist” poetics, but suffice to say that emphasizing the realized poem as a “rested totality” (*Prep.* 194) is hardly useful in reading Zukofsky’s poetry, although I believe this phrase can be understood in Spinozian terms. I am on record as arguing that “Sincerity and Objectification” is of doubtful value as a guide to Zukofsky’s practice (see “What Were the ‘Objectivist’ Poets?” *Modernism/Modernity* 22.2 (2015): 315-342).

<sup>47</sup> Again, in the original version there are two explicit mentions of “carousel” which were subsequently deleted, although later in the movement the repeat of “carousel” survives where it is conflated with Veit Bach’s mill stones, the noise of which accompanied him while he played his lute. This anecdote is J.S. Bach’s own version of how “music first came into our family” (127-128/15).

<sup>48</sup> Other examples of pedagogically enhanced poems are “Mantis” with its “‘Mantis,’ *An Interpretation*” and the original limited self-publication of *The First Half of “A”-9* (1940) with its multiple sources and “aids.”

discern readily enough the connecting figure of the first three quotations which all evoke a dynamic ellipse or rotation, a figure simultaneously centrifugal and centripetal, moving both away from and toward a given point. Also all the quotations—explicitly so in the case of Marx and Lorentz—concern problems of perception and representation. Particularly since the initial source quotation for the poem is from Dante (an image of apostles dancing for joy in the *Paradiso*), the quotations suggest different levels of allegory, although it is perhaps even more appropriate to see all the sources as conflated or fluorescing in the poem since it is possible to discern details from all the quotations that make their way into its words. The poem then is suggested by and generated out of found materials, that is, out of reading. The figure of the poem itself is of a dynamic object, whether the poem, what it reflects or its reading. The various readings of the poem, which are also its sources, are diverse framings or contextualizations of the poem and clearly there is no limiting circumstances or ultimate level of allegory for such readings—they depend on and anticipate the poem’s readers. The readers are those who are “glad they were there,” that is, in the poem, which is a green field for dancing, or the poem itself dances within a larger field or frame. The reader dances with the poem and therefore with the poet or others as the necessary sharing (“one hand / In the other”) that is language use, whether writing or reading. But then again the poem might be about the circulation of commodities and itself subject to economic laws of exchange, or, alternatively, it is a figure of particles and electrons in an electromagnetic field.<sup>49</sup> In the latter instances the “field” asserts itself as more than mere background, indeed as determining with regard to any particular, as well as anticipating the post-World War II conception of the poem as operating in and as a field. It is not quite adequate to simply say this is an example of polysemy without noting how the poem overtly refuses to settle or snap into focus on any given level of allegory or verisimilitude, but is precisely calculated to maintain the figural play, the implication that everything dynamically relates. For this reason, it seems to me the point is not that political economy or contemporary physics—the two primary criteria of “truth” for modernity—need to be seen as the ultimate ground for the poem, although certainly it is bound within these inertial systems of representation. The primary concern of the poem is the business of paradise, so to speak, that Spinozian necessity to persist. In this sense perhaps the Dante quotation and the brief enigmatic snippet from Cavalcanti have a certain privilege over the others.<sup>50</sup> Therefore the figure of the dance once again reminds us that self-actualization is always necessarily with and through others, that is, fugal. In this sense, the carousel in the opening poem of “A”-4 may not be such a random detail from everyday life but an image of the poem and its readers in a contemporary paradiso, a moment of felt uplift.

Speaking to Pound about the continuation of “A” after “A” 1-7, Zukofsky describes his intention “to twist the neck” of what he had already laid out “so that all the preceding detail gets a new head” (*EP/LZ* 112). I have been arguing that actually this has been his method all along. After “A”-7 Zukofsky abandons the technique of binding “A” together by overtly recycling words or phrases and serial rewriting. Even the quasi-allegorical deployment of such images as the sea and the liveforever will disappear in preference for more antic recurring images such as the horse. Yet the basic fugal manner of building by playing pieces

<sup>49</sup> “Song 27 (Song—3/4 time)” consists almost entirely of a recycled quotation from the same section of *Capital* about the circulation of commodities (*CSP* 58-61).

<sup>50</sup> Without getting too distracted, the Cavalcanti quotation reads in its entirety: “. . . luce e sta verde” (. . .shines and remains green). The immediate subject here is Love, but the combination of light and green is an epitome of Life or the life force or the Spinozian endeavour to persist (desire). Zukofsky comments on this same Cavalcanti quotation as well as the image of green in Dante and Shakespeare in *Bottom* 134-135.

of linguist material off each other has been set in place. It is commonplace to echo Zukofsky's claim that the early movements lay down a range of materials or themes that will be picked up later, which is certainly true but hardly amounts to saying much. As such, what is notable is their lack of ambition or the thinness of the materials compared with *The Waste Land*, *The Bridge* or *The Cantos*. There is a little history, myth or even a very pressing sense of crisis, and to the degree that the social or political is brought in it appears limited to the poet's personal experience. There is a studious avoidance of the heroic or even the anti-heroic. But the challenge as Zukofsky understood it was to express the social or the sense of his time not by attempting to represent it but by the formal and affective sense of density where everything relates and anything impinges on anything else. In other words the sense of the poem as the activity of heightened engagement with the ordinary, not by projecting the poet and the poem against some grander framework in response to crisis (of belief, meaning, politics) but as the intrinsic interest of active living. There certainly are moments of felt crisis—most notably "A"-8 and -10, and perhaps "A"-15 and -18 as well—but the specific historical crises of these movements do not frame or pre-condition the poem as a whole and therefore determine its values. From this perspective, my suggestion that we think of "A" in terms of Williams' *Spring and All* rather than *The Cantos* is perhaps not entirely outlandish.

For some readers all of this inevitably suggests that Zukofsky had no firm grip on how to develop his long poem. Today, at least in some circles, the modernist efforts at "total" works are their least convincing or most disturbing obsession, willful or desperate attempts to impose order against a sense of nihilism or catastrophe. We accept that their failures or incompleteness, often dramatically on display, are not due to some technical or structural shortcomings but inherent in the enterprise. What is striking about the young Zukofsky's start on "A" is his refusal to fall back on some form of mythopoetic underpinnings for his poem, his determination to write a rigorously secular poem out of what lay to hand, a poem of living in the everyday as the realized potentialities in the composition itself.

30 March 2018, Good Friday