

“raise grief to music”: “A”-11

(with an excursus on “Poetry / For My Son When He Can Read”)

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I

“A”-11, composed in 1951, manifests Zukofsky’s re-thinking of “A” in the aftermath of World War II, an articulation of his poetics that marks the end of certain directions initiated during the early stages of the poem.¹ “A”-11 has been most noted for its turn to the poet’s immediate family, to whom the poem is dedicated and who will have such a ubiquitous presence throughout the subsequent movements of “A”. However, it is too easy to say this movement simply marks the domestication of Zukofsky—a turn away from politics and history to more personal, even private concerns with an at times wearying focus on the pleasures of family life. There is truth to this, but I will argue that on the one hand Zukofsky’s basic poetic assumptions remain intact from his earlier work and that on the other the emphasis on the family needs to be read primarily in social rather than merely personal terms.

The decisive historical changes marked by World War II and its immediate aftermath coincided with major changes in Zukofsky’s personal life. In these years he married (1939) and became a father (1943), which also necessitated that he give up the somewhat hand-to-mouth existence of unstable, short-term jobs that had been his lot since graduating from Columbia University in 1924. This became more urgent as his young son’s musical precociousness revealed itself, requiring a routine that would nurture that talent, which included home schooling under Celia’s direction. During the war years this meant that Zukofsky worked as a writer and editor of electronics manuals for companies involved in the war effort, and then in 1947 he began what proved to be his first and last long-term job teaching basic English courses (composition and literature) to engineering students at the Polytechnic Institute of Brooklyn. Such work never much appealed to him, but it did offer a stability for his family and himself that in the long run enabled him to produce a large body of writing over the final three decades of his life: including over 80% of “A”, all of *Bottom* and *Catullus*. The 1940s, especially the first half of the decade, marked the lowest point of Zukofsky’s public career. He never stopped writing, but work on “A” was suspended after “A”-10 (1940), and apparently he only had the time and energy for shorter poems and very little else. But of course this was a time when publishing any poetry was difficult and received little encouragement, which was especially the case for more experimental modernist poetry, whose epitaph many had already written.

The following offers a reading of “A”-11 in two parts, and then will turn to the question of the redirection of “A” in the immediate post-war context by way of a consideration of the under-appreciated essay, “Poetry / For My Son When He Can Read” (1946).

¹ The table of contents for “A” dates “A”-11 as 1950, which may be when Zukofsky began the poem, but dates on the surviving manuscript indicate it was composed primarily in the spring of 1951 and the volume of Paracelsus he drew on for some of the details was also published in 1951—the latter was a gift from Edward and R’lene Dahlberg.

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II - Turning

“A”-11 is the last of the series of poems that adopt strict traditional forms, beginning with the sonnets of “A”-7 (1930) and continuing with the sestina of “Mantis,” the ballade that concludes “A”-8 and then the double-canzone of “A”-9. Specifically “A”-11’s formal template is a well-known ballata by Guido Cavalcanti (“*Per ch’io no spero*”), which T.S. Eliot famously drew on for the opening of “Ash Wednesday”—“Because I do not hope to return” (a poem Zukofsky did not particularly admire). In Zukofsky’s mind, these strict forms draw simultaneously on traditions of both music and love stretching from the troubadours through Dante and Cavalcanti to the Renaissance—Pound’s *Spirit of Romance*. Zukofsky is not simply modernizing old forms, and especially in “A”-11 he sees himself as drawing on and continuing this tradition of love poetry.

For a mid-century American poem addressed to intimates, “A”-11 is oddly mannered and formal, even without the emphasis on such hopelessly quaint terms as “grace” and “honor.”² There is hardly a word that is not poetically jaded, and even the odd exception, such as “wrangling” has good Renaissance precedent.³ In part the poem is an homage to English Renaissance poetry, and its baroque artifice and extended conceit are in imitation of the Metaphysical manner. In addition to Shakespeare, it was the 17th century lyric that was Zukofsky’s primary resource in the English poetic tradition. By writing “A”-11 in an overtly anachronistic manner, Zukofsky distances somewhat the propensity to read the poem as personal and evokes the echo chamber of the tradition, which not only differs from his handling of the prior templated movements of “A” but is atypical of his poetry generally. While this conventional artifice gives the impression, despite local obscurities, of being more accessible than is typical of Zukofsky’s work, it also creates a quasi-estranging and allegorical effect, which complicates reading the poem as mere lyrical expression. This too is solidly in the tradition of the 17th century lyric, in which the address to the beloved invariably takes on political and/or religious codings.

For all its complex and puzzling turns of phrase, the basic sense of “A”-11 is not particularly obscure. The central conceit, taken over from Cavalcanti’s ballata, has the poet instructing his poem as he sends it out to the beloved. Zukofsky takes this envoi convention a logical step further by addressing his poem from death, so it is the poet’s ultimate envoi as well, and the mission of the poem is to console the recipients, which is to be accomplished by reminding them that the dead poet lives on in the poem and in them as they read it.⁴ This is a variation on the familiar Renaissance topos of the relationship between mortality and art, and as such we can recognize this as an allegory of the afterlife of the poet/poem, which is to say of reading and readers. The death of the poet can be thought of as marking the moment the

² In “A”-13 it is remarked how the word honor has “gone out of English” (297).

³ As pointed out by Cid Corman, “‘A’-11: 1300-1950,” *Line 14* (Simon Fraser University, 1989): 11-31. For other readings of “A”-11, see Barry Ahearn, *Zukofsky’s “A”*: *An Introduction* (1983): 115-124; and Hugh Kenner, “Too Full for Talk: ‘A’-11” in *Louis Zukofsky: Man and Poet*, ed. Carroll F. Terrell (1979): 195-202.

⁴ Zukofsky’s idea of addressing his poem from death is suggested by Cavalcanti’s poem, in which the poet is evidently dying so that his inability to return to Tuscany is due to more than the fact that he is a political exile; however, he seems less concerned with consoling his beloved than that his poem continue to perform his courtly obligations toward her.

poet achieves his immortality in the afterlife of his art, or as the moment any poem goes out to meet its public fate, or as the moment of composition itself when the “self” of the poet disappears into the social articulation of language. In all of these senses, the conceit emphatically emphasizes the poem as social, not simply personal expression. The poem self-consciously plays with the simultaneous absence and presence of the poet or meaning, which on the one hand cannot be made fully manifest but on the other is made present in the enactment of the poem.

The poem’s obscurities are in fact due to its insistence on enacting this complex where each component necessarily implies and is explained by the others. The poem does this, as all poems do, as a trope generating machine, with the tropes reflexively turning back on themselves, so turning and mirroring are significant actions/images in the poem, as the first line indicates. As we attempt to locate or fix the poem in one location—poet, text, reader or world—it immediately deflects attention elsewhere, which must also be taken into account. The force, intention or sense of the poem cannot be located anywhere except in its total dynamic or network, so that focusing on one component or node immediately involves the others. Thus the staging of the poem—the poet addressing the poem to instruct its actions toward its readers—highlights the moment of composition as necessarily already assuming its readers and their response which feeds the impulse to composition in the first place. Much of the difficulty of the poem is resolved once one notices this insistent shifting or turning between points of relation, which often takes the form of rapid movement between pronominal deictics.

Turning to specifics, let me first make a few observations on the overall formal and thematic structure of the poem. Of its five stanzas, the first is irregular, as in Cavalcanti’s ballata, where he seems to have put the envoi stanza at the beginning which then frames the entire poem as an address to the poem. Each stanza ends with the word “honor,” which in its initial instance is taken from Cavalcanti, but Zukofsky has chosen to make it the refrain word throughout. With the first stanza stating the basic argument, the following four stanzas are paired, with the latter pair run together as the script the poem is instructed to speak to the poet’s son runs across both stanzas. The second and third stanzas focus on the definition of “honor,” and following from the opening stanza they are replete with negative words or images—weeping, hurt, ills, poison and the like—which all but disappear in the final two stanzas as the poem enacts the therapy it prescribes. In the final two stanzas, while “honor” continues as the terminal word, the term “grace” is introduced as the poem’s focus shifts from the poem gaining honor for the poet or poem to the grace the poem offers or realizes in the beloved.

The three opening lines introduce three images whose variations and intertwining will dominate much of the rest of the poem: river (flow, tears), music (song) and light (although in this first instance “light” signifies weight). As mentioned, the difficulty of the poem is in part that these images fail to hold steady, as their possible meanings shift, or, more significantly I would suggest, it is their interrelations that persistently change in order to manifest the formal dynamism of the poem.

The first line—“River that must turn full after I stop dying”—is semantically puzzling. There is little problem relating the beginning and end of the line: the river in its conventional senses of life or flowing time indicates the poet’s mortality; whereas the

individual stops dying the river of life or song continues. But in what sense does a river “turn full”? This “turn” takes on various possibilities, appropriately since we are in the realm of *verse*. Most obviously “turn” might indicate transformation, in which case the phrase suggests a fuller realization in death; that is, through the poem the singularity of the poet dies into the plurality of its readers. This would appear to suit the complementary recurrence of the image in the last stanza, where the “river’s turn” appears in apposition with the poet’s voice as it survives as the poem. But as already mentioned, this “turn” characterizes the poem throughout, its relentless turning on itself—the river is the stream of words of the poem, which however continue by a process of folding back on themselves, particularly in terms of the key images. Here the prototypical image of flow is in a curious sense spatialized, made full, and the suggestion of filling space as a structural dynamic with others will be reinforced elsewhere, such as with the image of the stars in the next stanza. As mentioned, I take it that this reconfiguring of images is integral to the intent of the poem—locally words, tropes or individuals do not fulfil themselves, are inert figures, until structurally (musically) related with others.

In the second stanza, we encounter an apt example of this turning. The poet tells the poem that in mirroring the light (“imprint”) of the stars, it should reflect (“graze”) this light onto the tears of the beloved, and then there is a turn as the poem is instructed to draw speech from the beloved or from the poem’s own love which is “faced” to the stars. Here the origin of the poem is deliberately shifted about from the stars (the world) to the beloved (readers) to the text itself which leads back to the stars. This stanza draws particularly on Paracelsus, although one does not need to identify this as an allusion, whose interest is as a typical early modern figural thinker: everything is interconnected as sets of analogies, the cosmic or social is always readable in, indeed participates in, any particular. The image of the stars is from Paracelsus (although of course it is perfectly conventional), an image of absolute distance that is also often taken to determine or at least effect individual fates, in other words an image of the interconnection of the whole with every particular. The latter half of the stanza, continuing from where I left off my paraphrase, draws on Paracelsus’ alchemical interests, a process of purification. Here the alchemical process of purification resulting in gold is also the possible affect of the stars’ light, and the suggestion is that the poem ideally transforms mere words (“tongues”) into music, which in turn is a process of transforming grief into grace. This is what the alchemical discipline was really about, a form of spiritual transformation. But the point here is that however one translates or paraphrases the lines, it is their persistent figural turning where the action of the poem lies, the total dynamic where the poem is necessarily in the world as a read text.

In the final stanza, where the poem is being instructed what to say to the poet’s son, the figural nature of the poem is made explicit in the well-worn image of leaves of a tree. Here the image moves from leaves that “light” stems, which are bound to branches and in turn to the common root from which we all talk. This talk is not the root of expression but of social binding (“we talk”), of the action of sociability itself that underwrites any specific linguistic act. We note too that if any particular leaf is dependent on the trunk and root, the opposite is equally the case, as the stars’ light (sun) is taken and alchemically transformed so as to make possible the root. If any given linguistic act assumes the social, the social exists as the totality of specific linguistic acts. At the point that Zukofsky reaches the root where we all

talk, he immediately reverses back to the image of the leaves, now explicitly pages of music or thought or poetry. The image or trope thus functions both vertically and horizontally: if in one sense the individual leaves necessarily trace back to the common root, in another leaves talk to leaves. In the poem, on the biographical level, the poet suggests that the leaves of his poetry are echoed and enhanced in the leaves of his son's music, which is a variation on what reading means. In this case, if the poem aspires to the condition of music, this aspiration can only be fully realized in the art of the son, but this in turn simply indicates that any cultural labor realizes itself, indeed is only possible, with others and as it is reworked by them.

While the earlier stanzas assert, in a sense, the afterlife of the poet-poem, they are nonetheless shadowed by death and mourning, as indicated by the various associated images scattered throughout. The final two stanzas will largely shed these shadows, and notably they primarily consist of a direct address to the son. Thus the basic conceit of the poet addressing his poem is compounded: the words spoken to the son by the poem as dictated by the poet. Again, the son stands in for the reader, and this may explain in part the oddly deferential manner that the father addresses his son, although as mentioned Zukofsky mimics a traditional formal manner throughout. This address nested inside an address again foregrounds the language as the plane of sociability, of mutual existence. In the opening lines of stanza four, acting as something of a preface to the address to the son, the poet sends the poem out into the world although or because he is now "dust," but as dust he is necessarily of the world which nothing can leave. The phrase "extended / world" presumably comes out of Spinoza, since extension is substance perceived or known as bodies, which is paralleled by the perception or knowledge of thought—extension and thought are distinct modes of knowing the same reality (substance). The implication that nothing can leave this world is that death marks a transformation, is the principle of change rather than any sense of extinction, which is the assumption on which the poem has operated from the outset. In this sense, then, the poem is "graced," which is glossed as holding the thought of death or deprivation to a minimum and is thus fit to console the beloved.

The working assumption of the poem is that grief motivates song, that is, a sense of pain or obstruction (history, mortality) drives action toward a sense of proportion, measure, a fit with or coming to terms with one's circumstances.⁵ The staging of the poem as consolation for grief rests on a basic assumption about all poems and indeed all human endeavor. In the third stanza of "A"-11 there is the statement, initially rather puzzling, that the rod blossoms where the river (of life or song) is poisoned. The poem as song is not merely compensation for grief but is an effort to transform grief into song as a more desirable state of being. While the grief in the first instance is presumably caused by the loss of the poet, this is merely emblematic of the human condition. If the sense of mortality is the quintessential human limit, then it is the sense of sociability wherein lies the potential to counter such limits. I will pursue this in the following section with the help of Spinoza.

⁵ In his anti-war film, *23rd Psalm Branch* (1967), Stan Brakhage incorporates glimpses of the text of "A"-11, specifically flashes of the word "Song" that opens the second line and then finally a pan across the complete line: "Song, my song, raise grief to music"—promptly followed by an image of an atomic explosion.

III - Honor & Spinoza

As mentioned, every stanza ends and the middle one also begins with the word “honor” (appearing seven times in all). In the first instance Zukofsky took this term from Cavalcanti, whose first stanza ends with this word, although thereafter he varies it with different words of the same rhyme. The familiar oddity of this word requires some effort on the modern reader’s part to decide just how to make sense of it in the context of the poem. As one would expect from the preceding discussion, key to the function of the term here is the sense of reciprocity.

In the first lines of the third stanza, Zukofsky seemingly ascribes a definition of honor to Spinoza (“the blest”) as the knowledge that “ills” are overcome by love.⁶ This is not exactly Spinoza’s definition of honor, which we will get to in a moment, although the claim that love can convert hate is in Spinoza and the underlying logic is the same. This is to say, positive reinforcement enhances any entity’s power, activity, reality, perfection, which by definition is what any entity desires, that is, as Spinoza puts it, it endeavors to endure. Therefore anyone necessarily prefers to be loved rather than hated, but this is not merely a self-centered preference since being loved also enhances the capability of our power, activity, etc., that is, creates a context that enables us to realize ourselves well beyond what we could ever be simply on our own—as Spinoza puts it, “there is nothing more useful to man than a man” (*Ethics* IV, Prop. 35, Corollary 1).⁷ Therefore the benefits of love are reciprocal and what is best for the individual is isomorphic with what is best for the numerous, which is the basis of Spinoza’s political philosophy. Absolute selfishness leads to an ethics of selflessness, since individuality is coherent only in that we exist within the density and ceaseless impingement of others. Therefore the poet instructs the poem to think most of those it hurts, in one sense because one wants to avoid creating such hurt even if unintentional, and in another because it is there that the poem can most significantly do its work of alleviation. In either case the poem turns potential hate into love and wins honor which enhances one’s virtue and power.

⁶ In “A” Zukofsky more often than not refers to Spinoza as “the blest” rather than by his actual name because his given name means blessed (Baruch, but changed to the Latinized form Benedict after his expulsion by the Jewish community of Amsterdam), and also because *Ethics* famously concludes with the proposition that “Blessedness [or intellectual love towards God] is not the reward of virtue, but virtue itself” (V, Prop. 42). All quotations from Spinoza are from the version Zukofsky used, the Everyman’s Library edition of the *Ethics*, which also includes “On Correction of the Understanding,” translated by Andrew Boyle (1910).

⁷ “As each man seeks that most which is useful to him, so men are most useful one to the other. For the more each man seeks what is useful to him and endeavours to preserve himself, the more he is endowed with virtue, or, what is the same thing, the more power he is endowed with to act according to the laws of his nature, that is, to live under the guidance of reason. But men mostly agree in nature when they live under the guidance of reason. Therefore men are most useful one to the other when each one most seeks out what is useful to himself” (*Ethics* IV, Prop. 35, Corollary 2).

The emotion or affect designated “love” is the same as that designated “hate.”⁸ However, the latter is passive, that is, it is the reaction to the impingement of something unpleasant or harmful or limiting as an affect that literally decreases our power or activity and therefore is experienced as sadness. “Love” is an active emotion, and hence increases our power and activity and therefore is experienced as joy (Zukofsky’s “delight”). The difference is between an emotion experienced as merely contingent, as if random and hence passively, giving us the experience of forces beyond our control, and an emotion whose causes are understood and hence enabling us to actively respond or adjust. For Spinoza, this active understanding or knowledge of the emotion is identical with increased power and activity, realizing a greater perfection or reality—a mode of knowledge is a mode of being. This is what is implied in Zukofsky’s succinct statement that we experience delight (joy) in knowing that love overcomes ills, which is not merely a kind of objective moral but the literal act of delightful knowing.

It is not difficult to understand how honor fits into this scheme, and Spinoza gives the following definition: “Self-Complacency [self-esteem] is the greatest good we can expect. For no one endeavours to preserve his being for the sake of some end; and inasmuch as this self-complacency is more and more cherished and encouraged by praises, and, on the contrary, disturbed more and more by blame, we are led in life principally by the desire of honour, and under the burden of blame we can scarcely endure it” (*Ethics* IV, Prop. 52, Note). Honor then is merely a socialized mode of power, how one is thought of and treated by others and in turn how one reciprocates in order to enhance their reciprocation. Indeed, the more ordinary sense of points of honor or esteem tend to turn precisely on such questions of mutual interchange. One can also understand how for Spinoza such a conception is inherently egalitarian. Honor then feeds into various related senses relevant to “A”-11: reputation, influence, imitation or emulation, love, and broadly the virtues of social reciprocity, the basic inter-dependence that means one can only realize oneself to the degree that others do so as well.

This is the point of the rest of the third stanza’s emphasis on flourishing, a word taken directly from Spinoza (*Ethics* V, Prop. 13): “The more an image is associated with many other things, the more often it flourishes. *Proof*.—The more an image is associated with many other things, the more causes there are by which it can be excited.”⁹ The affective power of any object of love—which by definition causes an increase in pleasure, joy, power, activity, virtue, degree of perfection—is enhanced by such flourishing. Zukofsky’s italicized phrase emphasizes that associative flourishing in particular means other people, the more who share and participate the better for oneself. In the biographical-familial context of the

⁸ The Latin term *affectus* is translated as “emotion” in the Boyle translation of *Ethics* Zukofsky used, but current critical fashion insists that this be rendered as “affect.” What the latter gains in philosophical precision perhaps loses in historical resonance as Spinoza was writing in a period much interested in the philosophy and typologies of emotions (e.g. Descartes’ *Les passions de l’âme* (1649)). In any case, given Zukofsky’s tendency to carry over the words and wording of his sources into his own reworkings, it is always preferable to consult the versions we know he used.

⁹ This is quoted in *Bottom* (29) and paraphrased in “A”-12 (174.22f) in a passage that can serve as a useful gloss on these lines.

poem, this is represented by the fact that the conventional beloved in this case is two, whose love is reflected and augmented in each other, as is emphasized at both the beginning and end of the poem. The logic behind the emphasis on the mutuality of the positive should by now be obvious. All of this then leads readily into the final lines of the third stanza's re-emphasizing the benefits of reciprocity. Memory, which is fundamental to the flourishing of the image or of the self, does not simply happen, but is an affect of being with others—in Spinoza the traces of affects that linger. The pleasure or love that we find in the poem is the same as the love the poem draws out of us; we might even say the poem as an entity like ourselves necessarily seeks love in its readers. If effective then the words of the poem “spin,” with a punning nod to Spinoza; they reflect, interrelate, augment each other—“spin” is a revved up version of “turn.”

“A”-11 is written to win praise from or to be thought well of by others (readers), and its continued existence depends on such honor. But to gain honor implies that the poem takes from or mirrors those others: to become others in reading it must take from others to begin with. When we are dealing with words and making with words, all this is obvious enough—it is nonsensical to talk about absolute singularity or private languages. In any case, any evocation of Spinoza immediately implies that everything is necessarily related to everything else, ceaselessly impinging on and affecting each other. If we step back and remind ourselves of the purported intent of the poem, raising grief to music, then we can readily see how this is underwritten by Spinoza: the transformation of passive sad affects to active joyous ones. The poem attempts to enact or create that affect in its intricate turnings, which broaden out the perspective from the poet's death to a more comprehensive perspective in which that death is no longer a simple finality. The poem will flourish to the extent that it finds readers and effects further creative activity. The poem strives to enhance a mutually empowering stance within the world among others.

It is possible to map Zukofsky's well-known statement of his poetics as lower limit speech and upper limit music onto the Spinozian model, so that the integral here is one of relative passivity or activity. I have argued, however, that the integral must be maintained and Zukofsky does not advocate a Mallarméan poetics of purifying speech. Nor should Spinozian blessedness or the intellectual love of God be understood as some transcendent state—it is always a relative realization within the mix which necessarily includes inadequate notions and the errors of imagination.¹⁰

Considering “A”-11 as a love poem, I have argued that despite the outward trappings of a personal poem, love is thoroughly socialized—desire is understood on the one hand as entirely egotistical (the endeavor to endure, to realize oneself), yet in such a way that one's self-interest necessitates the recognition of mutual benefit and, going a step further, that one's very sense of self is thoroughly mediated through and in response to others. The location of the self becomes every bit as elusive or omnipresent as that of the poem as presented in “A”-

¹⁰ This is not the place to pursue the highly contested question of what Spinoza means by “the intellectual love toward God” within the context of a philosophy where God cannot in any sense be understood as an object—we are always a participating constituent *in* or of God or Nature. Furthermore, Zukofsky never mentions “the intellectual love toward God,” nor the related concept of “under a certain aspect of eternity,” except in one significant instance in *Bottom* (423-424; for discussion see Z-Notes commentary on “A”-22 & -23).

11. The object of love gives us joy and the more so that it flourishes, is mirrored elsewhere. Here love has little interest with the self-authenticating concerns of the erotic. Yet Zukofsky unquestionably was interested in sensuality, in the tactile sense of his poetry, and “music” in fact importantly designated for him this visceral affective relation with words that has been too often suppressed by an unbalanced emphasis on semantics and ideas. For Spinoza what thought knows is the body—a claim Zukofsky quotes (“A”-12.232, *Bottom* 94)—that is, thought necessarily arises from the affects registered by the body, which are not then perceived by the mind but are the affects registered in the mode of thought—the body does not cause thought, it is thought.

Although I have emphasized the social in reading the poem, this is not to cancel out its personal address, which Zukofsky explicitly indicates in the dedication—an infrequent paratext in his work. His immediate family is crucial in the sense that they represent that ideal basis of human contact and understanding out of which he or anyone writes and in this sense are intertwined in his “own” words. This is how, I would suggest, the omnipresent references to his family in the later work ought to be understood, and it is worth noting that for all their presence, there is no familial melodrama or even much effort to develop character. This is true to a remarkable degree even in the autobiographical *Little*, which for all its focus on the family avoids any psychodramatic development, within individual characters or within the family unit. The dramatics have to do with the negative outside impingement of the music business on the pursuit of the art as a worthwhile mode of existence.¹¹

As a statement of poetics, “A”-11 insists on an affirmative stance, raising grief to music, and that this essentially involves the sense of others—the poem is an acutely self-conscious example of any cultural expression that embodies and enacts our sociability. So although there are any number of registrations of the ills of contemporary history in Zukofsky’s poetry, there is an absence of moral judgments or the righteous rage so evident in many of his contemporaries, or, more to the point, such stances do not frame the reading and intent of his poetry. Poetry, in Zukofsky’s conception, is little concerned with truth saying or witnessing that sets up the poet in the prophet role. The problem is not revealing something that words or their more conventional usages obscure, but what happens in the linguistic exchange as a social act.

IV - “Poetry/For My Son When He Can Read”

Although the 1940s were Zukofsky’s leanest period, especially before he began work on the second half of “A”-9 in 1948, he did compose an important essay at the very end of the war that laid out his thoughts looking forward to “A”-11 and beyond. When he gathered his critical pieces for *Prepositions* (1967), Zukofsky chose to open the volume with “Poetry/For My Son When He Can Read,” which he intended as a key statement and reassessment at a critical point in his life.¹² Despite the end of the war, Zukofsky feels little

¹¹ For further discussion of the family in Zukofsky’s work see the Z-Notes commentary on Zukofsky and Henry Adams. On *Little*, see Jeffrey Twitchell-Waas, “Louis Zukofsky” [a critical survey of his fiction], *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 22.3 (Fall 2002): 37-52.

¹² Zukofsky also included this essay in the original Origin Press edition of “A” 1-12 (1958). The essay is dated 1946, which is when it was completed, although its autobiographical

optimism about the world's prospects, much less for his own poetic success. Although the Cold War was not yet fixed in place, it was clear the historical conflicts and hopes within which he had situated the early movements of "A" were now dead. At the same time, the modernist formalism to which he was committed and that directly or indirectly reflected the historical moment between the two world wars was now widely written off as finished: its formal innovations safely absorbed within the great tradition with their excesses dismissed. In such circumstances, Zukofsky reacted as one might expect and attempted to think back to something like the primordial grounds or purpose of poetry. The essay's title itself indicates his effort to think about what value poetry can have for others looking towards the future. The full elaboration of that rethinking or restatement will manifest itself as *Bottom*, but his initial essay is this 1946 essay.

His opening definition or axiom states baldly that poetry "has a sense for everything," which he then reiterates in negative terms: life without poetry would have "little present" (*Prep.* 3). This indicates the homespun phenomenological manner that Zukofsky will adopt in this essay, but as a definition it is either too empty or too full. However, he needs to clear a space for a consideration of "poetry" prior to or separate from any specific manifestation designated as a "poem"—what is the relation of "poetry" to living that gave rise to it in the first place? This question is then approached from a number of angles which gives the essay a somewhat wandering and unfocused feel, but then part of its argument is that you cannot expect a neat definition, which would only mean that one arbitrarily pulls out as paradigmatic this or that poem from this or that context. Poetry is everywhere and nowhere. While any given poem is an occasion registering a certain sense of being in the world or defining an "awareness of order" (8), it is one of poetry's distinctions that a "sense for everything" necessarily includes uncertainties or negative capability—the outside of language is always immeasurably greater than what any given linguistic configuration can say.

Zukofsky then calls on Confucius for a definition of poetry that firmly situates it socially, but to begin with it is perhaps the restatement in terms of "technics" that is more helpful: "how things are made, why people live to make them, and live together by them" (4). Clearly these questions do not define the specificity of poetry as such but merely of social activity or cultural labor generally. Indeed, a good deal of the essay argues that there is no essentialist difference between poetry and science, as they are necessarily modes of cultural work and reproduction, or what he calls "phases of utterance," and he then gives a catalog of instances: the scientist, architect, dancer, historian (he is referring to Henry Adams), economist (referring to Marx), weaver, painter, musician (8). The discourse here is essentially

framing quite precisely indicates it was initiated in May 1945 and concluded in late 1946, which accords with the dates on the manuscript (Marcella Booth, *A Catalogue of the Louis Zukofsky Manuscript Collection* (1975): 206). The final paragraph situates itself on the day of Paul Zukofsky's third birthday, which would have been 22 Oct. 1946, although the completion date on the manuscript is 22 Dec. The essay was not published until a couple years later in *Cronos* 2.4 (March 1948). For the purposes of this discussion, I will refer to the essay as it appears in *Prepositions*, although the original printed version included a couple extra pages, consisting mostly of quotations, to which Zukofsky added Whitman's complete "Respondez!" when it was reprinted in *5 Statements for Poetry* (San Francisco State Collage, 1958). These augmentations are available in the *Prepositions+* edition (2000): 216-221.

humanist, but Zukofsky's characteristic slant is clear in the essay's concluding sentences where he evokes his title, anticipating when his baby son will be able to read this essay that has nominally been addressed to him (that is, to the future). Zukofsky notes that what his son will read will not be "me," who will be "lost" by the time he bids his son goodnight or greets him in the morning, and that it has required the entire history of human culture to nurture those very gestures. This conclusion encapsulates in its characteristically low key manner the main argument of the essay, which is a definition of poetry as a social act. The most ordinary, even routine gestures, which in this case are specifically linguistic, embody and enact the totality of human culture, the desire and necessity to be with others that is love. Saying good night or good morning to one's baby son is perfectly personal and private, yet is an act made possible by its participation in the human totality. This is paradigmatic of Zukofsky's assumptions throughout his work and indicates what he means by poetry having a sense for everything.

We might briefly note the parallels with "A"-11, where I suggested the poet's existential self dies into language and the social. As such, the poem is addressed to the future, the son-reader, in whom it is resurrected or enacted. But this is not a matter of the recovery or repetition of some essential semantic soul—the existential self remains dead—but more in the order of a chain of re-enactments made possible by the social, indeed is simultaneously the reproduction of the social, which nonetheless does not degrade the sense that this enactment is experienced as personal and as the effect of a specific other. In "A"-11, there is the suggestion this enactment achieves a further fulfillment in the son's music, and in a moment I will consider what is meant by this characteristically Zukofskian idea of "music" as the ultimate horizon of the poem.

We can now turn back to the Confucian definition, given in terms of education, which starts in poetry, is enhanced by "proper conduct," and consummated in music (4).¹³ Zukofsky glosses these terms to take some of the Confucian starch out of them, so poetry is apprehension, awareness or consciousness in the world, which is strengthened by sociable action or practice and then culminates in music as the ultimate desire for universal communication. Such tripartite schema are very common in Zukofsky's critical writings, especially in *Bottom*, and are the simplest model of a dynamic or dialectical structure in which each term necessarily implies or generates the others. They should not be understood as historical or developmental models, whereby one first begins with some primordial sense of poetry out of which evolves a process culminating ideally in music. These are not intended as teleological models and all the terms are implied and mutually defining from the outset. In this case we are presumably talking about a definition of poetry, so it would be odd, if not a bit nonsensical, to say we start with "poetry" which is then left behind for "music," although of course there is a tradition in some quarters where music represents the most refined and purified of arts and therefore toward which all other arts aspire. Zukofsky no doubt has this in mind and some might assume this is what is implied (by a poetics of "upper limit music" ("A" 138), but this is not actually what he means and he does not think of his poetry as a purifying process. Here music, defined as the desire to speak to everyone, is something like a Kantian

¹³ This remark from the *Analects* (VIII.8) was appended to "A Statement for Poetry (1950)" (*Prep.* 223); see also letter to Williams (*WCW/LZ* 317).

imperative: poetry or any art or any cultural utterance whatsoever cannot but desire to speak as if to everyone as an implied if never fully realizable horizon. The Confucian guise of this particular model—aside from any references to Pound one might discern—highlights the social ethos of whatever one chooses to call education or the socialization process, which presumably is not meant to evoke a dogmatic set of behavioral codes or discipline but an ecological conception of personal and social existence. This is not static, and “proper conduct” implies a dynamic interaction within an always socially mediated world. A few pages further on, “proper conduct” as concerns the poet is defined as the avoidance of clutter, an accurate definition of an “awareness of order” that enables the possibility of communicating with everyone (8).

Throughout the essay, Zukofsky asserts that any poem measures itself against all other poems or even “each word of poetry ever written” (4). The term “measure” is crucial and its explication is the primary burden of the essay, as well as indicating that Zukofsky is thinking alongside Williams, his comrade-in-arms on this topic. Zukofsky quotes Plato to the effect that “If number, measure and weighing be taken away from any art, that which remains will not be much” (6), which will reappear in his later homage to Williams, “A”-17 (380).¹⁴ Measure is integral to or definitive of the form of the poem, but this implies its necessary relationship with the outside, so that “measure” is how one situates oneself in the world, or how the poem enacts that measuring (an “awareness of order”). In other words, it is the “sense for everything” or of presence. This particular formulation—the poem measured against every other poem—emphasizes the tradition, the poet’s inheritance, which Zukofsky compares with starlight: the light we see now is from the past, while “shining tonight into tomorrow” (4). When Zukofsky states that any poem measures itself against all other poems, he is talking about the poem’s embodiment of tradition. However, this is not meant in terms of Eliot’s famous image where the new poem situates itself in the museum of the tradition, altering it ever so slightly—a view that implies a certain kind of class education which justifies or explains the necessity for a poetry that relies heavily on allusion, a technique that itself is symptomatic of or projects a culturally fallen state dreaming of what has been lost. Zukofsky is clear that “all poetry” against which poets measure their own includes all the poems yet to be written or never written—it is a conception of the tradition not in terms of educated consciousness but as infinite potential out of which a given poem is a minute and perhaps transitory focal point. A given poem, then, arises as a possibility that embodies the pressure so to speak of all other possible poems, actual and potential. We might recall here Zukofsky’s well-known analogy of the poem as an objective lens bringing the rays to focus, which has too often been misunderstood as tending toward an inert concern with the visual image or object. This misses the point of Zukofsky’s deployment of a scientific definition: what one sees with an objective lens is not the thing in itself but refracted light, which is pervasive yet unseen until focused but that focus necessarily implies its immanence in the totality.

We can see that “Poetry / *For My Son When He Can Read*” is an attempt to step back to assess what poetry is or can be and an affirmation of poetry even while it resists defining

¹⁴ In “A”-17, Plato’s remark is quoted from a poem in *Anew* (CSP 127). On Williams and Zukofsky on measure, see Z-Notes commentary on “A”-17.

poetry as a specific type of artifact or activity. The essay opens with the poet observing the playful prattling of his son which prompts him to pull out some old poetry notes that he had “forgotten” in the personally and socially deadened circumstances of the war. His son is not merely an image of a hopeful future for which it once again seems worth writing, but of the moment when the child enters language, the social. The baby spontaneously fills the vacuum in its life, as Zukofsky puts it, that is, he creates measure or an “awareness of order,” which aspires, ultimately, to a sense of shared reciprocity with others.¹⁵

If this sounds too humanistically utopian, it does not overlook the dissonance and determinism necessarily involved, the impingement of others as limiting, nor that the sense of lack is axiomatic and can never be definitively satiated. Zukofsky includes a fairly elaborate, if oblique commentary on a poem by the late Tang poet Yuan Chen (Yuan Zhen, early 9th century) that highlights the distances between poet and others (readers). Zukofsky interestingly emphasizes that the translation is mediocre (he does not say, but it is by Arthur Waley), that the poem’s unheard music can only be projected in imagination, that he is ignorant of the original language (although perhaps someday he will be able to learn it), plus there are the obvious gaps of time and culture (*Prep.* 5). As he puts it these are impediments or circumstances mediating or refracting one’s view of the original light of the stars, and as such they are always in place, so that choosing an ancient Chinese poem functions to emphasize the point that we never discern pure origins or experience. Indeed, the central image of Yuan Chen’s poem—a glimpse in a dream of a pitcher as it recedes below the surface of the water at the bottom of a well—itsself encapsulates the sense of extreme mediation and distance, or, the relative triviality of what we perceive within the totality. Yet the point is that across the insurmountable gaps of language, culture, time, translation one can still “read” the poem. Simply put any poem conveys or asserts fundamental human commonalities and as such becomes the basis for “measure.” But what it communicates is not the original or unique experience of the poet—even though what this poem describes, the sense of mortality, is perfectly universal—but rather its intention. Zukofsky offers a paraphrase of the poem as a suicide note that tells its readers to live life to the fullest—a suicide note as a paradigm for poetry! The fact that Zukofsky’s paraphrase seems to have no relation to Yuan Chen’s poem on the level of content only highlights the point that what a poem says is not primarily what is said. A suicide note is addressed to the living and necessarily implies the desire to be with and live in others, however much the accompanying act may seem to contradict the message. Again, we note the parallel with “A”-11’s address from death to the living. Zukofsky’s thought experiment might be understood as an image of absolute nihilism (suicide) that nonetheless undermines itself in its very appeal to others and its desire to exist after death (what is most disturbing is suicide without a note, not least, perhaps, because we cannot be certain it is suicide rather than an accident).¹⁶

In the light of “A”-11, it is of interest to us that Yuan Chen’s poem is about marital love. As mentioned, “A”-11 is the culmination of a series of major poems that are templated

¹⁵ One might compare this account of filling the void with the version of the creation myth from the Rig Veda in the opening passage of “A”-12 (126-127).

¹⁶ Spinoza famously denied the very possibility of willing suicide as this would contradict any entity’s most essential definition or nature, its endeavour to endure (see “A”-12.187).

onto traditional forms closely associated with the topic of love, that is, with Pound's Spirit of Romance (although I would argue this series could be extended to include *Catullus* as well). It may superficially appear that Zukofsky disposes of this out-worn topic in the radical reworkings of his poems, but this is not the case. It is true that the conventional heterosexual staging has disappeared and the female beloved replaced by sawhorses, a mantis or objects of labor. But when, for example, he rewrites Cavalcanti's canzone in terms adapted from Marx in the first half of "A"-9, labor, under the aspect of use-value, is love as dialectical or reciprocal activity, and all the other poems can be readily understood as similar adaptations of love. As I have been emphasizing, love is the enactment of sociability.¹⁷ What does not much interest Zukofsky are the conventions of romance, courtly love or the erotic, conceptions of love as an individualizing or authenticating event. In Yuan Chen's poem, the poet's dream of the disappearing pitcher on awakening draws his attention to a vision of a vast graveyard and thus to the presence of the dead among the living, which finally allows him to identify the pitcher as his recently deceased wife. Here the personal is infused with the sense of human commonality. Yuan Chen's poem is full of pathos, it is a poem of personal mourning, yet the underlying force is love which binds even the living and the dead, as is also played out less darkly in "A"-11. Another way to make the same point, albeit it somewhat bizarre, is Zukofsky's framing of the poem as a suicide note.

While Zukofsky carefully situates his essay at a crucial historical moment, he does not directly indicate its polemical targets, except for a vague reference to "timely writing" and the extensive comparisons of poetry with science. Particularly given the historical moment when Zukofsky is writing, a fairly obvious meaning of "timely writing" is political poetry, which of course he himself had been much engaged throughout the 1930s. The concern is that the immediate exigencies of the moment preoccupy the poem or the sense of the poet's task, whereas Zukofsky is interested in a more fundamental or trans-historical sense of poetry's purpose or impetus. This of course is no less ideological and Zukofsky's later work can be characterized as Cold War poetry in that he can no longer imagine the possibility of radical social change, at least in the West or the Soviet Union. In the 1930s this was not merely possible, it appeared inevitable, and beyond the political choices between fascism and

¹⁷ The very first of numerous quotations from Spinoza in *Bottom* is almost the only instance in Zukofsky's work taken from *The Short Treatise* precisely because it gives a definition of and an emphasis on the specific term "love" that is not typical of Spinoza's mature writings: ". . . love is of such a nature that we never strive to be released from it as we might from surprise and other passions; and there are two reasons for this, first because it is impossible, and next because it is necessary that we should not be released from it. It is impossible because it does not depend upon ourselves, but only on the good and benefit which we observe in the object, and which of course would not have been known to us if we did not wish to love it. But this is not compatible with our freedom and does not depend upon us, for if we knew nothing it is very certain that we would not exist. It is necessary that we should not be released from love, because on account of the frailty of our nature we should not be able to exist without having something to enjoy with which we might be united and strengthened" (qtd. *Bottom* 15-16). The translation is by Lydia Gillingham Robinson, *Spinoza's Short Treatise on God, Man and Human Welfare* (Open Court, 1909): 73-74. Although he owned a copy of this work, as far as I know Zukofsky makes only one other use of the *Short Treatise* in "A"-21.495.1-3.

socialism, the crucial point was the sense of momentous historical change for good or ill. This gives way after the war to a Manichean struggle in which the opposing political powers have become antithetical images of each other and whose actions are determined more by their negative responses to the other than by any vision of fundamental social change. Only along the considerable fringes of the First and Second Worlds is meaningful political transformation imaginable, which Zukofsky acknowledges here and there in the later movements of “A”, but without much optimism about any reconfiguration of the dominant geopolitical arrangement.¹⁸ It is precisely this sense of historical inertia that motivates Zukofsky to think back to the grounds of poetry as potentiality, so that if there is little prospect of significant social change, a sense of the impulse that underlies all cultural labor can be maintained and performed as communal possibilities among words. For Zukofsky this was not political, and in this sense he was a man of the 1930s for whom politics meant alignment with political action groups and their programs.

To some extent it seems probable that Zukofsky has the example of Pound in mind, even though the latter is not directly referred to in “Poetry / *For My Son When He Can Read.*” It may or may not be mere happenstance that Zukofsky began the essay the same month that Pound was arrested as a fascist collaborator, but over the next year and a half of its contemplation and composition, he certainly would have been hearing about his old friend’s predicament. The prominence given the statement from Confucius and the poem by Yuan Chen suggest that Zukofsky is offering a counter-reading to Pound’s use of such materials to recall him to the proper responsibility of poetry.¹⁹ Elsewhere I have argued for the importance of Pound’s political fate in Zukofsky’s own thinking about the relationship between politics and the task of poetry, although there were numerous less dramatically public examples to reflect on in the aftermath of World War II (see Z-Notes commentary on Zukofsky, Williams & Pound).

Another sense of “timely” is the effort to capture moments of perception or authentic experience, particularly as a counter to the pervasive sense of alienation and social automation that Zukofsky refers to in the opening paragraphs of his essay and which would become a central preoccupation of mid-century poetics. This too did not much interest

¹⁸ See Mark McMorris, “Postcolonial ‘A’? Empire & Nation in Louis Zukofsky’s American Movements, ‘A’-14 – ‘A’-17,” *Xcp: Cross Cultural Poetics* 8 (2001): 11-22. The obvious major exception to Zukofsky’s general avoidance of directly dealing with history and politics in his later work is “A”-15, whose central figure, President Kennedy, represented the hope for a breach in the frozen status quo of the Cold War. This perhaps was easier to imagine in his martyred state when any such hopefulness was already extinguished for the time being, so that the poem holds up that hope as a flash that appears only as it is receding in a moment of crisis.

¹⁹ In introducing the quotation from Confucius, Zukofsky gives an odd, albeit characteristic locution referring to a face that he respects and loves (*Prep.* 4). In the first instance, this face is clearly the text or quotation itself, but it is also plausibly the reader with whom the quotation is being shared, and if we want to put a specific name to that face, Pound would be the obvious choice as Zukofsky reads Confucius back to him. I have argued that Zukofsky does something similar—quoting Pound’s Chinese translation back at him—in his brief statement on Pound, “*Work / Sundown*” (*Prep.* 165-166) (see Z-Notes commentary on Zukofsky, Williams & Pound).

Zukofsky or else seemed secondary to what he conceives to be the more fundamental impetus of poetry. While many of his poems, especially short ones, appear to originate in or are staged as moments of perception, they never remain there since, as the conclusion of “Poetry” states, the experiential moment is always gone beyond recuperation, except as re-enacted by the reader (who may be the poet) within the space or measure offered by the poem. While some of Zukofsky’s poems may strike certain readers as unfinished or lacking distinct shape, this is not because they gesture at the open-endedness of the originating experience or process, rather the words are inclined to pursue their own sense of form, which invariably will tend to include the sense of infinite complications. The repetition of the poem in reading is not interested in a re-presenting of an experiential moment or a gesture of the authentic, but in conveying a sense of active attention or measure that always implies being with others. If automatization is a problem for Zukofsky, he rarely mentions it and his response is an intensification of attention, which the poem’s “awareness of order” is intended to activate.

Zukofsky resists making exceptionalist claims for poetry, which is most apparent in the comparisons he makes with science. Here he enters a general debate that became particularly acute during the mid-century period, in which poetry is either declared obsolete, a vestige of a pre-scientific age, or poetry is seen as a mode of knowledge distinct from the scientific that needs to be maintained or recovered in the face of hyper-rationalization and pervasive social instrumentalization.²⁰ These antithetical perspectives are two sides of a tally that generate variations on a common historical narrative, whereby a prior state of experiential wholeness—religious, mythic, magical—gives way to or is split off from an analytic and scientific mode of knowledge that systematically desacralizes the old mode of knowledge. This narrative can then be seen as progressive or regressive or both at the same time. Zukofsky, always skeptical of historical narratives, does not posit any essential distinction between poetry and science—as mentioned, they are ultimately social manifestations or “phases of utterance” of an axiomatic human activity of measuring or “awareness of order” (8). Possibly, he suggests, poetry puts greater effort into accounting for the intricacies of the real, than the relative abstractness of science, which causes poetry to appear imprecise in comparison. But, he immediately adds, it is preferable to recognize that the “most complicated standards” of science are poetic, and he remarks that even the most accurate measurements of science must allow for some uncertainty in the instruments and observer.

To the degree that Zukofsky defines or characterizes “poetry,” it is this openness to permutation, a resistance to allowing the concept to contain the sense of particulars. In one formulation: “For if poetry can ever be contented it will be content only through a specialized sense of every unfolding” (*Prep.* 7). This is a typical Zukofskian critical statement in which the tension between the key terms or thoughts is counterbalanced without resolution as a sense of wholeness is necessarily bound up with the respect for the infinity of particulars, or a dynamic interaction between inside and outside. This then is the sense of present and for everything, or Spinozian flourishing.

²⁰ See Peter Middleton, *Physics Envy: American Poetry and Science in the Cold War and After* (U. of Chicago Press, 2015).

V

Although the individual movements of “A” tend to appear autonomous and even more so in the case of a closed-form example such as “A”-11, it is worth reminding ourselves that at least nominally Zukofsky presents the parts of “A” as a larger whole. He followed up “A”-11 almost immediately with its formal antithesis—“A”-12 is a 120-page sprawl composed quite literally out of whatever the poet found on his desk. If “A”-11 can be said to offer a diagrammatic sketch of Zukofsky’s poetics in a deliberately restrained form that constantly coils in on itself, “A”-12 presents a textual environment in which the reader will find no path-thread that will traverse the poem, much less encompass it. Both poems are situated in the intimacy of the immediate family, but whereas “A”-11 expands outward through its overtly figural and allegorical manner, “A”-12 works on a principle of contingency, and while we can loosely characterize its method as collage, it incorporates diversely worked passages moving freely between raw and cooked writing. We find in abundance all the most notable elements of “A”-11—wife and son, Paracelsus and Spinoza, death and music—but now re-contextualized both in terms of forms and materials. The only cohering principle of the poem is the compositional process itself as a self-reflexive activity that is coextensive with ordinary living or an “awareness of order,” which as such allows in anything with all its heterogeneity and dissonance. If “A”-11 is more readily recognizable within the tradition of song, Zukofsky provides ample indications that he also thinks of “A”-12 in musical terms—as fugal or as a compendium of fugues or even as an uncompletable fugue—so that we cannot think of his persistent insistence on poetry’s analogy with music in narrow terms but as itself dialectical, constantly turning on itself. This asymmetrical pairing of movements is only the most obvious and extreme example of a pattern begun with “A”-7 of alternating formally centripetal and centrifugal poems—the former adopting a more personal, that is, more recognizably lyrical stance while the latter are more public or engage with history, but the implicit challenge is to read these poems in relation, as intersecting and playing off each other. The movements appear to require quite different readings, what I have characterized as allegorical or vertical in the case of “A”-11 and a more metonymic or horizontal in “A”-12, but of course these are mutually defining and will always tend to fold back into each other.

Reading “A”-11 next to “A”-12 suggests that the tight intimacy of the family unit or of the poem-reader relationship needs to be placed in relation with the larger world that ceaselessly impinges on or bleeds into to the former. If, on the other hand, we consider “A”-11 with “A”-10—written on the fall of France in 1940—we note an even more jarring difference, in this case more in terms of tone and content than in form. As a poem written in immediate response to war and the seeming triumph of fascism, “A”-10 not only expresses a sense of violent despair but concludes in deliberate fragments and inconclusively, since, it is to be hoped, the current state of affairs will not prevail indefinitely and what eventually ensues will necessarily effect the continuation of the poem or even whether it is possible to go on with it. “Poetry / *For My Son When He Can Read*” indicates that Zukofsky is once again feeling that that is possible and reaffirms the grounds upon which he can do so. What is striking about the fragmentary concluding pages of “A”-10 is the emphasis on images of traumatized children fixated on death—in other words, the destruction or failure of the family. This is one way to think about how Zukofsky links “A”-10 and “A”-11, the latter

offering a vision of the reconstituted family, which is simultaneously the relations between poet and readers, as the necessary affective space for any affirmative sense of commonality.

3 Sept. 2016