

“A”-16 is one of three occasional movements numbered out of chronological order, all composed in 1963 when Zukofsky was still primarily preoccupied with *Catullus*. “A”-17 and “A”-20 were composed or, perhaps more precisely, assembled for specific occasions which relate to their numbering: the former in response to William Carlos Williams’ death and given its number because Williams’ birthday was Sept. 17 (he would have been 80 in 1963), while “A”-20 was written for Paul Zukofsky’s 20<sup>th</sup> birthday. “A”-16’s number cannot be explained in the same manner but its placement in the sequence was determined by the key word “flower,” since “A”-15 ends with an enigmatic flower passage and “A”-17 begins with “Anemones,” whose derivation from Greek means “windflower.”<sup>1</sup> The incident that purportedly initiated this poem was Paul’s comment, on observing the wind battering a geranium on the Zukofskys’ terrace, “not exactly an equal (or fair) fight, is it?”

The most obvious point about “A”-16 is its minimalism, which immediately raises the question of its inclusion in a long poem. However, if we examine the page simply on its own terms, we notice a set of oppositions. First of all, the very few words scattered across a page calls attention to the page itself and the familiar, modernist metaphors it gives rise to. The blank page as a void or abyss against which the words attempt to cover, bridge or compensate, but here their precariousness can hardly be hidden. Or on the other hand, the blank might be interpreted as plenitude, a reassurance that even a few scattered words somehow do add up. This would be the usual initial assumption of reading: that the words need to be and can be linked up. So the very minimalism can be seen as words torn asunder, mere bits floating in the void (wind blown flowers) or as delicately balanced gestures toward vast possibilities of meaning beyond what can be expressed by ordinary everyday language—a perennial ideal of poetry much prized by modernists. These readings are of course not simple alternatives but implicate each other as they allegorize the blank of the page in relation to the words. In either case, the few words implicate a larger context that in some sense they must call on to make sense, even if that sense is a denial of sense.

Similarly, the relations between the words themselves set up a number of oppositions. The exaggerated space between the two halves of the poem, each of two words, invites both bridging and differentiation. The social abstraction of the upper half contrasts with the seemingly concrete natural nouns of the lower pair. Is the former in some sense a comment on the latter, an equivalence or metaphor, or are we to take these as absolutely separated? Although presented as two words, given their isolation “wind” and “flower” invite the possibility of being read as a single word, particularly if we are aware of the anemones that immediately follow on the next page. Taken together they gesture toward a naturescape—a harmony in contrast to the suggestion of inequality. Or they might be taken as in opposition: the power of the wind (potential or actual) in contrast to the fragility of the flower. Within the context of the poetic tradition, these two words or images could hardly be more conventional and over-worked, as well as being the sort of images one often encounters in classic modernist minimalism, such as an Imagist poem or haiku. As such the words are overloaded

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Scroggins, *The Poem of a Life: A Biography of Louis Zukofsky* (2007): 391. “A”-17 was composed a couple months before “A”-16, and therefore may very well have affected the composition of the latter. “A”-16 was first published on the back cover of *Origin* 14 (second series) in July 1964 before the composition of “A”-14 and “A”-15, both written in the latter part of 1964, so the end of the latter may have been added with “A”-16 in mind. It is not often that Zukofsky made such clear links between the beginnings and ends of movements.

with potential cultural meanings: the permanence of nature as opposed to human transience, or on the other hand, the ceaseless changeability of the winds, the ephemerality of the flower and so on. Such allegorization readily becomes banal, however, because of its tired conventionality, and therefore turns the reader's attention to their very status as words and whether and how they are still available for poetry. Zukofsky seems continuously preoccupied with this question or challenge, as explicitly addressed in "Mantis": An Interpretation" or in the sonnets of "A"-7 after scornfully dismissing "sonneteers" in "A"-1. Flowers, of course appear throughout Zukofsky's poetry and with increased frequency in his later work, culminating in *80 Flowers*. But these flowers are less images than words and their manifold intertwined cultural, etymological and homophonic networks. The "wind" and "flower" of "A"-16 barely evoke specific images and are more interesting as they relate to the other words on and beyond the page.

The upper pair of words are stepped with a line space between as if to suggest but at the same time to delay being read together. Pronouncing them, it is almost impossible to hear them as discrete words, which contrasts with the distinct sounded difference between the second pair, even though semantically they can be read as a single name. The layout of the upper words visually sets off the "an" that otherwise might be too readily run past—Zukofsky's concern that every word receive its due. Obviously "A"-16 is premised on the weighing of each word, and in this sense might be compared with the opening block of "A"-22, a type of concrete poem that asks the reader to closely eye and sound the letters and their combinatory possibilities as a preparatory exercise for reading the two dense movements to follow. "A"-16 is one of the an-songs announced in "A"-14 (315), in which all the remaining movements of "A" must begin (more or less) with "an" or "an-." For Zukofsky, "an" suggests possibilities, examples or cases that lack the insistence and finality of "the." It suggests an-other. The highlighting of this initial "an" turns our attention to the words as words—as grammatical and rhetorical signs. If we take "inequality" as thematic, as it seems to insist, it would readily apply to all the various oppositions already mentioned, asserting an asymmetry between the various possible related terms. As a number of commentators have pointed out, this particular term in the context of the 1960s cannot avoid referring to the civil rights struggle alluded to in "A"-14 and elsewhere in the movements of the 1960s, particularly if we keep in mind the coda to "A"-15 that enigmatically suggests a definition of "negritude" having something to do with flowers. However, aside from the question of just what such an allusion to the situation of blacks in America has to do with the minimalism of "A"-16, such heavy handed suggestions of political relevance risks reducing "inequality" to a mere buzz word, whereas I would suggest Zukofsky wants to take the buzz out. The question is how the word or concept is used and its possible senses. If the word thematizes the oppositions within the few words of the poem, then we have already seen that the valorization of "inequality" can differ and take on positive meanings: such as a resistance to merely being the same. The second half of "A"-9 proposes "related is equated," which has to be read with and in some sense opposed to "related as equated value" (108, 106). I understand the former as egalitarian, since in the Spinozian conception everything is necessarily and by definition related. The recognition that everything is "mutual," to evoke a term Zukofsky uses in a Spinozian context elsewhere (*Bottom* 423), that is, related and interdependent, means everything is equal, but also unequal in their individual integrity—in other words not reduced to sameness "as related values." Early in "A"-8 Zukofsky quotes Marx on "equal rights" to make a similar point: the principle of equality necessarily implies inequality, different people are not the same (45) and the point is not to reduce everyone to such sameness in the name of equality. As Zukofsky points out elsewhere in "A"-8, one must ask: "Who says it, what said, to whom?" (73). Any word is a point of debate, and so in/equality are two mutually implicated words or concepts whose specific meanings depend on use and contextualization.

So what does “inequality” mean in “A”-16? An inequality implies other inequalities but also a concept of equality (actual or potential). The poem, I have suggested, sets up a set of equivalences and differences without deciding how any specific case is to be valorized, which requires further contextualization—relations or implications latent in the words. It is in this type of reading activity that Zukofsky locates the social or political in his later work. In the admittedly puzzling coda to “A”-15, I have argued (see Z-Notes commentary on “A”-15) that Zukofsky, taking the example of flowers but ultimately of the words themselves, implies the recognition of hybridity, that wherever we look or read we see cultural and ethnic intertwining. This is, poetically, his response to the race question, or to violence generally—the recognition of our inextricable mutualness that is plainly evident if only we read closely. “A”-16, though, is not specifically addressed to the race question, as “inequality” is obviously a more generalized question, which the poem considers precisely by triggering a series of questions as to its role in the poem itself. For Zukofsky any such questioning or consideration of words is itself an awareness of being with others, including the dead and those to come.

“A”-16 is open to diverse relations with the rest of “A”. This movement functions as a point of “measure,” an important if somewhat elusive term for Zukofsky as well as other poets of the period. In “A”-12 he twice offers the remark that “Measure, tacit is” (131, 156, see also “A”-13.276), that is, measure is a matter of counterpointing, an interplay with the always assumed difference or other latent in any word. In the brief preface to the reprint of “A” 1-12 (1967), he quotes himself to the effect that his poetry attempts to “sound” his times—fathoming through resonance (*Prep+* 228). The poem therefore always assumes and functions within this context or condition of contingency that presumable sounds back and through the text itself, as must necessarily be the case. We can apply this rough model to “A”-16 in a number of ways. Surely in some sense “A”-16’s meaning in “A” is precisely its difference, its function as a counterweight to the other far more wordy movements. One might detect an element of self-critique, as if all this verbiage and long complicated poeticizing could be said in just a few words—a minimalist Orientalist ideal of the poem that has played an important role in modern Anglo-American poetry. At least the poem implies something of a self-reflexive critique of the “A”’s natural tendency toward quantity and ambition. In a sense “A”-16 might exemplify an essential point of “A” generally—that whatever is said is never simply here or there but always implicates a larger totality, whether we think of that as referring to the larger context, or to the socio-historical baggage words always carry, or simply to the fact that words are never fully present, are indeed the mark of mediation.

Throughout his later work, but perhaps most obviously in *Bottom*, Zukofsky frequently evokes the ideal of silence, a condition beyond the need of talk—a variation on his stated theme that when love sees nothing need be said, whereas the brain tends to compulsively rattle on and spoil the moment. However, silence is meaningful from the side or state of non-silence. If one says, “silence,” then of course one is not silent, and if one is silent, that too signifies in relation to saying. The blank page of “A”-16 is also silence broken by a mere few words that only emphasize silence’s presence, which as we have already discussed can be valorized either negatively or positively. Although Zukofsky was certainly attracted to Wittgenstein’s conception of a silence beyond what can be said, I think it is more useful to think of this silence as what he also refers to as the “hidden” (see “A”-12.187 and 224), the totality largely beyond the perception or conception of any given individual yet necessarily assumed and participated in by them. This is a Spinozian conception of absolute contingency in which any action, speech or poem is necessarily informed and shaped by this hidden. “A”-16 can be seen as marking or gesturing toward that totality that is necessarily assumed by but easily repressed in the other movements. In this sense “A”-16 might be taken as “A” looked at through the wrong end of a telescope and radically rescaled. The crucial point, however, is

measure or interplay, that the poem is never simply here without implicating there—“an” implies other cases not “the.” “A”-16, then, is about reading “A”, which is simple but infinitely complicating.

Returning to the sequencing of “A”-16 in “A”, it is worth noting that beyond the flower links “A”-15 and “A”-17 are obviously connected by the death of Williams, whose funeral is described in the former (374). One might wonder, then, why Zukofsky chose not to juxtapose these latter two movements but instead interpolated a small pause in the form of “A”-16. “A”-15 implies that Williams was the U.S.’s true poet laureate, although largely unrecognized by the nation—a view that Zukofsky had held for many years, as he indicates in “A”-17 (see particularly 378 and 387). “A”-17 begins by quoting Williams on flowers that are explicitly poetry, indeed, books of the stuff. It seems somewhat odd that this implacable adversary of the British poetic tradition never tired of producing flower poems, but then we have the key here in that they are textual flowers sprung anew from the soil of America. This is simply to suggest that if we place “A”-16 in the Williams nexus, the implication is that no other poet grappled more intently with the senses of “inequality” in the American context. Zukofsky was one of the very few readers who immediately recognized “To Elsie” (“The pure products of America go crazy”) as one of the very great poems of and about the nation—a hymn to hybridity and its discomforts (*Prep+* 53, 150). And who else would have dared assert as early as 1930 that *Spring and All* was the century’s equivalent of Wordsworth’s preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* (*Prep+* 198, “A” 378).

This is not to insist that “A”-16 must be understood in relation to Williams because the principle of “A”’s structure generally allows any movement to be taken as a point in relation to which any or all the other movements can be read. “A”-16’s very minimalism foregrounds this point and assertively questions what it is doing in this poem, so that “an/inequality” is open to its diverse senses in light of its readings through the rest of the poem.

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