

Although recently the topic of Zukofsky’s Jewishness has received quite a bit of attention, a question rarely posed is why a poet raised in a pious Yiddish speaking environment so infrequently addresses this issue—parts of “Poem beginning ‘The,’” “A”-4, segments of “A”-12 and a very few short poems are about the extent of it.¹ “A”-4 offers an answer. Indeed, “A”-4 is intended as Zukofsky’s programmatic statement on his relation to Jewishness, and it is unfortunate, if unsurprising, that virtually all commentators have preferred to consider this issue solely or predominately on the basis of “Poem beginning ‘The.’”

As most commentators have noted, “A”-4 sets up antithetical voices: on the one hand those of the “fathers” representing Judaic tradition and the maintenance of a specific Jewish identity, while on the other their “children” who adopt a more modern and presumably assimilationist outlook. As far as this goes, the basic pattern is common enough among any inter-generational group in a modern context, especially of immigrant groups. While “A”-4 has obvious biographical roots to the degree that Zukofsky felt the need to include such a movement in the first place, we should not assume he is playing out a specific family drama. “A”-12 will give a portrayal of his father that has little similarity to that of the fathers in “A”-4, and Zukofsky appears to have given up his faith as a young adolescent without creating much rancor. In “A”-12, Zukofsky’s grandfather tells his son not to lose his faith when he emigrates to the U.S., but this detail is mentioned in the context where the grandson has clearly, without resentment, given up his (143).

If we skip the opening lyric passage for the moment, the movement breaks fairly neatly into two halves: the first given over to the voice of the fathers and latter half (beginning with the reference to religious monsters) to that of the children. The voices of the fathers are appropriately delivered in a somber, judgmental tone, while the younger generation is primarily expressed through Zukofsky’s translations from the modernist Yiddish poet Yehoash. The fathers assume a state of permanent exile, so although wherever they put their hats is home, the point seems to be that there is nowhere where they feel at home. Home exists as the community of the faithful under the “stars of Deuteronomy,” thankful for the slightest recognition from a distant God, yet apparently there is a sense of deathliness or “void” in their faith. They pray to be deafened to the siren music of their host culture, and they make a telling pun when they accuse their children of having “passed over” to the alien, who are here described as “the ostracized”—a neat reversal of the usual relation between the Jews and Western culture, with presumably a reference as well to Christ as an ostracized Jew. In the context of “A”-4, the music the fathers ask to be protected from is that of Bach’s *St. Matthew Passion*, which is sounded in the immediately preceding lines. The specific line from the libretto—“He calleth for Elias”—records Christ’s last enigmatic words, which could

¹ For discussions of Zukofsky and his Jewish heritage see Rachel Blau DuPlessis, *Purple Passages: Pound, Eliot, Zukofsky, Olson, Creeley and the Ends of Patriarchal Poetry* (2012): 76-85; Norman Finkelstein, “Jewish-American Modernism and the Problem of Identity” in *Upper Limit Music: The Writings of Louis Zukofsky*, ed. Mark Scroggins (1997): 65-79; Stephen Fredman, *A Menorah for Athena: Charles Reznikoff and the Jewish Dilemmas of Objectivist Poetry* (2001): 124-143; Harold Schimmel, “Zuk. Yehoash David Rex,” in *Louis Zukofsky: Man and Poet*, ed. Carroll F. Terrell (1979): 235-246; Mark Scroggins, *Louis Zukofsky and the Poetry of Knowledge* (1998): 121-139; Maera Y. Shreiber, *Singing in a Strange Land: A Jewish American Poetics* (2007): 98-127.

be understood as a last call to the Jews. All of this, not least the assumption of a strict dichotomy between us and them, strongly echoes a major theme of the Old Testament prophets warning and threatening against intermingling with foreigners.

In one of the earliest discussions of Zukofsky and Jewishness, Harold Schimmel notes that the fathers' distinction between Speech and jargon is coded and refers to the early 20th century debates between the relative status of Hebrew and Yiddish (239).² The distinction obviously implies a strict difference between linguistic purity and hybridity, between the sacred language kept in the hands of the learned and the everyday vernacular—rather like the old struggle between the authority of the Vulgate and swarm of vernacular translations of the Bible that split Western Christianity. The primary example of lower-case jargon is the renditions of Yehoash's Yiddish poems, which are not simply modern but, in the first case, clearly an adaptation of or from Japanese. The larger world flows in and this "jargon" is not simply Yiddish but modern poetry and modernity generally, whose key characteristic, arguably, is the opening up to the variety and vagaries of the vernacular, to hybridity, of which Zukofsky's translation of a translation or imitation is an apt example. The distinction between Speech and jargon is only put into the mouths of the fathers, and the poet does not simply choose between them as he allows the advocates of Speech a voice. Yet clearly he is of the party that would subsume Speech within a hybrid of multiple voices or songs. The poems of Yehoash that Zukofsky chooses to include are notably full of nature imagery in contrast to the rather dissected imagery of the fathers, and Yehoash is celebratory while the fathers judge. In what seems to be the second of the Yehoash poems, the poet imagines himself a tree setting down deep roots, spreading its limbs and praising the Sun. Zukofsky makes a complex pun with the phrase "still Heir" (14), which appositionally refers to the poet's prayer to the Sun and so is also an "air," a song that is "heir" or son to the Sun. All of this as well as the descriptive "still air" of the natural scene expresses a moment of belonging and well-being. As permanent exiles, the fathers do not set down roots, and their prayer to the Sun is comparatively defensive and insecure. Yehoash, who famously translated the Hebrew Bible into Yiddish, by no means rejects or represses his Jewish inheritance (he is "still Heir"), but sees it as intermingling, changing, always renewing itself with and even within other cultures.³

Zukofsky then quotes an anecdote from Bach to explain his own musical inheritance: supposedly music first came into the Bach family when his great-great-grandfather played the lute while working as a miller. Bach wittily imagines the sound of the grinding millstones and his grandfather's lute making music together. Again we have the suggestion of art's roots in the ordinary, workaday world, the vernacular—as he says in a following line, song arises from noise. That humble beginning will eventually manifest itself in his grandson's own great music, specifically the *St. Matthew Passion*, which as we noted strikes a significant note earlier in "A"-4. But more importantly, of course, a performance of Bach's *Passion* on the central date of the Christian calendar will give rise to "A" by a young translator of Yehoash. The courses this poet tides from mean many cultural strands twisted together, indeed using

² Zukofsky confirms that he had this debate in mind in a 27 March 1961 letter to Babette Deutsch (*SL* 274).

³ Judging from the translation by Benjamin and Barbara Harshav of one of the poems Zukofsky uses, "Among the Trees," he deliberately leaves out any Biblical imagery in Yehoash's original (*Sing, Stranger: A Century of American Yiddish Poetry: A Historical Anthology*, eds. Benjamin Harshav (2006): 90-91. Someone competent in Yiddish ought to examine Zukofsky's renditions.

whatever comes to hand, and that means he will think of himself not as a Jewish poet, nor as a Yiddish poet.⁴

Immediately following the Bach anecdote is a somewhat unexpected mention of a carousel, whose relevance here is evidently as an image analogous to the turning millstones that gave rise to old Bach's music. However, this carousel also relates back to the mention of turning horses in the opening lyric of the movement. In the original publication of "A"-4 this lyric emphatically begins with the carousel but Zukofsky later edited this detail out, leaving the most puzzling segment of "A"-4 even more so. Most discussions of "A"-4 simply ignore the opening set piece as apparently beside the main concerns of the movement. On the other hand, this lyric, detached from the rest of the movement, has not been entirely ignored because it is so obviously a characteristic Zukofsky poem—one might want to say a classic example of an Objectivist lyric. But why is it here? I would suggest that this poem is the voice of Zukofsky, which has little in common, stylistically speaking, with either the fathers or Yehoash, yet the implication seems to be that the Hebrew tradition, Yehoash and Bach are all in some sense in or make possible this poem. The poem juxtaposes and interrelates a complex of lights: a splash of lights reflected in the river (presumably the lights of the carousel), lights on a pier above which is a light on a hill, which may or may not be the same as the light of the lamppost that is lit up by the light of a truck, then we return to the horses with sides that gleam apparently from the reflected light from the river. The recuperation of the carousel image helps make clearer sense of the imagery here, but this is probably why Zukofsky decided to eliminate it since this is not intended primarily as an image but as a song—a song that arises out of the observation of as mundane a scene as old Bach playing along with his millstones. Even if visually obscure, the complex of interactive lights ought to be clear enough to suggest a dynamic constellation that sharply contrasts with the fathers' "stars of Deuteronomy"—whose very abstract expression reinforces the sense of the rigidity of their moral law and world view. On the other hand, the Yehoash renditions are littered with mention of lights, of "clear star," the Sun, a candle to be lighted (in contrast to the fathers' refusal of "feast lights"). In many respects, the depiction of the fathers reminds us of American stereotypes of Puritans, whose self-repression is a refusal to accept this world and life as sufficient.

Lights appear to be one of the key binding motifs of "A"-4 generally, but the handling of imagery in the three major parts I have identified are strikingly different. If in the debate between fathers and children, Zukofsky would be expected to come down firmly with the latter, his own poetic language is certainly not that of Yehoash. The prominence in Yehoash of comparatively sentimental nature imagery marks the work as early modernist, in which the vestiges of Romanticism remain plainly evident and ask for symbolic readings. From the comparatively abstract stars and light of the fathers whose focus is on the image of the Temple built of stone housing the Law, Yehoash is outdoors with flowers, birds and trees and a mountain. Whereas the Sun of the fathers represents God, Yehoash's sun is also prayed to while it marks off the passing of time. The opening segment in contrast seems thoroughly and coolly secularized and the setting is clearly urban. One could say that nature continues to appear prominently in the imagery, but it is subdued by the modernity of the urban environment and the de-sentimentalized language. One cannot say it is entirely resistant to

⁴ As far as I know, Zukofsky never tried his hand at writing in Yiddish. The very earliest surviving letter of Zukofsky's is a 1920 cover letter for the submission of some translations of Yehoash to *Poetry* magazine when he was 16 years old and had just entered Columbia University (*SL* 22). Apparently there is no record of precisely which poems he submitted, but it is quite possible, especially in light of Zukofsky's frugal habits, that the Yehoash passages included in both "Poem beginning 'The'" and "A"-4 were done years earlier.

allegorical reading, but it does not ask for it, and in place of clearly defined images, we have an example of that sensory assault characteristic of the modern urban experience as famously described by Simmel or Benjamin. This historical layering, offering a snapshot of the process of modernity, is not meant merely to position Zukofsky's own work as ultra-modern, although there is an element of that, but is an effort to deal adequately with the complexity of modern consciousness. While in one sense we can line these three "stages" up, each seemingly erasing the preceding, Zukofsky's sense is that they all remain actively present and interrelated—parts of the diverse courses he tides from.

In "A"-5, Zukofsky explicitly picks the topic of "A"-4 in the context of a dialogue with a friend, Kay, to affirm his disinterest in identifying himself with his "people" in preference for "all people" (17) and that his "strange speech" is to be a song of multiple voices, which the movement as a whole demonstrates. These voices include that of the Jews but folded in with many others. The conception of his poetry as multi-voiced also relates directly to the question that in a certain sense underwrites the first six movements and is explicitly articulated at the end of "A"-6 as whether poetry can be written on the model of the fugue (38). After "A"-4, explicitly Jewish concerns will almost entirely disappear from "A" until after World War II in "A"-12 with the homage to his recently deceased father and his oblique response to the Holocaust.

As a final note, a few remarks about the revisions Zukofsky made to "A"-4 when in the summer of 1942 he revised "A" 1-6. For the most part he tightened up here and there through deletions and the elimination of the more personal details, but there is no indication that he rethought the movements and the revisions are unlikely to alter how we understand them. The possible exception is "A"-4, where Zukofsky deleted entirely an autobiographical passage of 20 lines from the middle of the movement and did a fair amount of rearranging of his collaged pieces—something he never did elsewhere (see the Textual Notes on the Z-site). The effect of the latter was to sharpen the division between voices of the fathers and those of the children (Yehoash), which originally were more interleaved. The personal passage he deleted is an unusual expression of pique, which he did well to get rid of, but which has some topical interest. The opening connection of this passage is the inclusion of a single poem by Yehoash translated by Reznikoff's later wife Marie Syrkin in Mark Van Doren's just published *An Anthology of World Poetry* (1928), which Zukofsky suggests short changes Yehoash and perhaps also by implication Yiddish poetry generally, as it is the only example Van Doran includes at the end of his section of Hebrew poetry. Zukofsky then makes a swipe at the *Menorah Journal*, a leading voice of humanistic Judaism, and quotes a remark from an article in the journal by Van Doran, who was one of Zukofsky's teachers at Columbia, describing Zukofsky as a rather retiring, shy young poet. Zukofsky obviously was not pleased with this thumbnail sketch and this entire passage evidences some of the residual animus against Columbia that he had expressed in "Poem beginning 'The.'" In any case, the passage seems primarily intended to designate a concrete literary-intellectual Jewish group and identity that he does not want to be part of.⁵

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⁵ Stephen Fredman discusses this deleted passage in the context of his argument that Zukofsky was poised at this time (1928) between becoming a poet of Jewish identity, like Reznikoff, or that of a cosmopolitan modernist, like Pound (126-137). Obviously, I do not think there is much to this argument, although it is one that will appeal to many.