“in whose memory am I?”: *Arise, Arise*

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Arise, Arise fails to show up on most radar screens, but it is in many respects an impressive performance and one of Zukofsky’s main works of the late 1930s. The play is initially baffling and often absurdist, yet at the same time is largely unrelieved by the high-jinxs and outrageousness one normally expects from the type of modernist drama that surely influenced the work: Expressionist and Surrealist drama, as well as their precursors Strindberg and Apollinaire. Aside from the recurrence of a fairly small cast of characters—all given generic designations: Son, Mother, Girl, Doctor and so forth—it is almost impossible to give a useful summary of the play’s dramatic action, since the play lacks both character or plot development, and in this respect anticipates Zukofsky’s general treatment of Shakespeare in *Bottom*, as well as his choice of Plautus for “A”-21.

The play is about revolution and in particular attempts to envision and enact the feel of utopia, the revolution realized. In a play that deliberately subverts any sense of narrative or dramatic development, the only development in the play is from a situation replete with various conventionalized tensions and differentiations to the concluding scene of marriage and dance, a conventional comedic ending. Zukofsky is not interested in explaining how the characters or the world they exist in gets from here to there; in the course of the play a revolution happens, but the usual cataclysmic public actions that we think of a defining a revolution take place off-stage, if at all. The only indication of such an event is the intermittent mention of general strikes, which as Lenin emphasized established the preconditions for revolution proper. Revolution here simply designates the decisive gap or break that marks the difference between the set of conventionally defined relations through the majority of the play and the utopian reconfiguration of these relationships in the concluding scenes, which can only be “explained” in social terms, even though outwardly nothing has changed. Zukofsky is interested in dramatizing how this feels rather than how it happens. As revolutionary theater, Zukofsky attempts to move the viewer from what is familiar to what is possible. The latter might as well be called Shakespearean, since as mentioned its form is that virtual cliché of comedic endings in marriage and dance, but precisely because such conclusions are consciously utopian, projected into a time that can only with danger be didactically defined beforehand, its overt conventionality functions as a reflexive reminder that this is not a diagram or representation of what the future society looks like. Zukofsky imagines what the future society might feel like based on the possibilities present in the past and present, which is why this is such a spectral play full of the dead.

The generic designations of the characters, which identify them according to their social positioning, automatically generates a full set of social relationships and hierarchies—across class, gender, generations and ethnicity—which in turn generate predictable conflicts and narratives. The earlier scenes of the play offer various hints and beginnings of such clichéd dramatic developments: the Son confronting the cold bureaucracy of the hospital, the apparent dying of the Mother, the suggestion of a romance between the Doctor and Nurse, the Aunt as capitalist in conflict with her strike supporting daughter (Girl), and so on. Yet none of these possibilities goes anywhere, and whereas the hierarchical relations between characters appears strictly conventional early in the play, by the end they have become magically transformed into an egalitarian community, where even the most abrasive of characters, the capitalist Aunt, is readily absorbed into the dance.

Given the lack of motivation for this transformation, it is appropriate that the entire play, except briefly at the very beginning, takes place in a space marked off by a second inner “dream curtain,” which is raised and lowered between each scene while the main curtain remains up. Thus the action takes place in a realm where the real as is becomes wobbly and

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where transformational possibilities are released. While Zukofsky was well aware of Surrealism and especially the proto-Surrealism of Apollinaire, he was suspicious of their more doctrinaire and Freudian rationalizations, as he would be throughout his life about psychology as an interpretive model.[1] While he often enough used dream materials in his writing, he tends to deflect their significance into a social dimension. In *Arise, Arise* this is clearly evident as the stereotypical character roles and relations become progressively unsettled and finally reconfigured. Above all, the tensions produced by the social unconscious and the release of alternative possibilities centers on the relationship between the living and the dead. Succinctly stated, the process of feeling the possible future as Zukofsky imagines it is one of bringing the dead alive into the present, which is the primary sense of the play's title as indicated by the opening of the play in which we hear the first lines of John Donne's "Holy Sonnet 7" ("At the round earth's imagined corners"). The play will translate Donne's vision of the dead rising at the Last Judgment into secular and socialist terms—the other source for the play's title is the *Internationale*—and concludes quite literally with the dead arising and dancing with the living. Or, more to the point, the dead are only dead if the living see them as such, whereas Zukofsky imagines the redeemed society as a process of seeing the dead alive in the present. In its simplest sense, by destabilizing the realistic verisimilitude, the play creates a sense of unpredictability and possibility, allowing what would normally be repressed in the name of the real that is. Such has always been the venerable function of dramatic ghosts.

As mentioned, at the opening of the play the action briefly takes place in front of the dream curtain, although no one appears and we only hear the voices of the Son and Mother off-stage. However, a situation is quickly sketched in which a sister-daughter has recently died, so that the Son's reading of Donne's sonnet is a conventional effort to respond to the Mother's incomplete mourning process. This intimate and personal situation, which has biographical origins, is then projected out into a social context in the rest of the play: the dream space is presented as social, wherein also must lie the resolution of what initially appears a purely personal problem. The sense of loss is overcome by a recognition that the dead remain alive in the present. In the course of the play, several characters are resurrected: the Mother and Attendant D both die and then reappear at the end. An even more ghostly presence is the daughter-sister who does not literally reappear but at one moment she appears to manifest within the Girl (33-34), whose character metamorphisizes several times in the play, and in the concluding marriage-dance, which ostensibly celebrates the wedding of the Doctor and the Nurse, the Father declares: "Everybody happy and taken care of? Is there no one gliding from footrest to footrest at my daughter's wedding? No jail nearby? No troops mustered? Then congratulate me" (50-51). In another play, this would be the speech of a doddering old man or simply a drunk, but here clearly not: the wedding is also his daughter's, previously mentioned by the Son as taking place while he was young (51), as well as signifying its socially symbolic sense of a transformed society no longer requiring the state apparatuses of restraint.

In terms of Marx's theories of labor value, labor itself is an animating activity, not only a humanizing of inert matter but reciprocally of the laborers as well realizing themselves in and through the transformation of the object. This in turn implies the need to see labor, the presence of the dead, embodied everywhere and our common inheritance, not least in our social identities. At one point the Son, paraphrasing Marx on money as the universal

[1] During the period he was working on *The Writing of Guillaume Apollinaire* (1931-1932), which evidences significant interest in Apollinaire's plays, Zukofsky was reading a fair amount of Surrealism as indicated in the footnotes, although the latter cannot always be taken too literally.

equivalent, asks: “Did you work today? Did I? Our work is congealed in money…” (43). Money, as emblematic of abstraction generally, “congeals” labor, reducing it to an abstract measure that blinds us to our own contribution to and inheritance from social reproduction, and in so doing reducing labor-power vis-à-vis the laborer to a death-like state that is clandestinely siphoned off by the capitalist. The dead, so to speak, exist everywhere in everything around us, and the “dead” are not simply those who have slipped their mortal coil, but those masses entrapped in a deadening cycle of existence under capitalism: “Arise ye damned of the earth” goes the opening line of the *Internationale* and echoed several times in the play. There are various mentions throughout the play of the dead living in those in the present or else the desire that they do so. The emblematic instance concerns the death and resurrection of Attendant D, apparently killed in strike violence. Standing over his grave and accompanied by the music of the final chorus of Bach’s *St. Matthew Passion*, in which the Apostles mourn around Christ’s tomb, Attendant R speaks a variation of the libretto: “On your grave we raise our rag / Red with the staunched blood of your chest— / Rest you safely, safely rest” (35). Attendant R appears throughout the play carrying a red rag, whose symbolism is obvious enough and might remind us of a famous scene in Chaplin’s *Modern Times*, and a little later in the same scene he attaches his rag to a stake he sticks into the garden while he sings again to the music of Bach’s final chorus: “Dead in your grave but alive in us / In the strength you had, in your strength we have—” (39-40). So Bach is called upon in terms of the *Internationale*: “Arise damned of earth,” Attendant R half a page later greets the arrival of the Doctor and Nurse, who indeed were among the damned at the outset of the play but have now awoken—the Doctor himself will be paraphrasing Marx a moment later. Later in the play Attendant D suddenly “wakes up,” greeting his colleague: “What’s up, Rag, in whose memory am I?” (47).

Particularly given the often reiterated view that Zukofsky’s post-political, post-Marxist phase is marked by a turn to and retreat into the family, it is necessary to point out the centrality of the family in this play and well as elsewhere in the work of the 1930s. I would suggest that what I have called the feel of utopia that concludes the play is understood as based on a sense of family, that is, that sense of belonging, support and inheritance we most strongly identify with the family in its positive aspect. This has nothing to do with the specific social structure designated “family”—Zukofsky in fact incorporates a quotation straight out of *Capital* on the historical relativity of specific family structures (32). Nor is this a mere idealization of family, since the play explicitly presents a variety of ordinary familial tensions and conflicts. Rather it is a matter of finding some experiential basis of sufficient commonality to draw on in order to imagine and project a plausible sense of the utopian, and Zukofsky repeatedly calls on the images of family and childhood for this purpose, as he will continue to do throughout his life. Family in this sense is not so much a matter of blood relations as a minimal social unit within and out of which develop our most basic sense and possibilities of well-being, as well as the tensions that limit that well-being.

A further aspect of the play with wide-ranging implications despite lying quasi-hidden in the text is the incorporation of numerous quotations throughout. In a few cases these are overtly presented as such, for example the opening lines of Donne’s “Holy Sonnet 7” read out by the Son in the first scene, or familiar enough to be readily identifiable, such as the Father spouting the opening line of the *Communist Manifesto*, but predominately the quotations are more or less buried. It is often possible to detect that a character is mouthing a quotation due to the linguistic register of the speech or the simple oddity of what comes out. Yet the distribution of quotations has no apparent relation to the characters speaking them, and in some cases, a single block of quotation is “spoken” by several different characters supposedly carrying on a dialogue. A list of the more important sources would include: Donne’s “Holy Sonnet 7” (most of the sonnet is silently scattered in bits and pieces throughout the rest of the

play) as well as various other medieval and Renaissance lyrics, the *Pervigilium Veneris*, the libretto of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*, the *Internationale*, *The Communist Manifesto* and *Capital*, Henry Adams' *Education* and *Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres*, various historical documents describing New York in the Dutch period, translations from Guillaume Apollinaire and even one of Zukofsky's own poems (to which could be added, Firdosi's *Shahnamah*, Charles Lamb, Homer, "Rip Van Winkle," a camping manual, odd bits evidently taken from newspapers, and whatever else has yet to be identified).[2] The most obvious significance of this layering in of quoted materials has already been indicated, since it creates a spectral quality within the text itself and its performance. While we may find it of real interest to identify these various and sometimes rather odd sources—although in general they simply indicate Zukofsky's reading interests at the time[3]—conventional interpretations of quotations as establishing lines of authorization are not Zukofsky's concern here. What is is the construction of a text or performance that resonates and echoes its own textuality: that it is an artifact made out of inherited materials. Obviously, if we hear this textual echoing, this further undermines the illusionism of character psychology, which we have already seen is of little interest to Zukofsky. If we learn to see and hear beyond such habitual realist illusionism, then what the text performs is an awakening of all the "dead" voices, human labor, the cultural increment that invariably lies buried within language and other social materials. The recognition of specific dead voices is of little importance, since obviously there are no originators in this process of cultural reproduction which echoes back and through history and the social totality. Rather than think of Zukofsky as eccentrically fitting in all manner of quotations into his play, it would be better to think of him shaping the play out of and around various reading materials that particularly interested him, and indeed this generally is how Zukofsky worked throughout his career.

10 Oct. 2013

[2] For specific identification of quoted sources and their original contexts, see the Z-site.

[3] The sources dealing with early New York history almost certainly came from Zukofsky's work with the WPA. A number of the details worked into *Arise, Arise* are from descriptions of colonial gardens, which was one of Zukofsky's research projects. There is a vignette of himself pursuing research on gardens in "A"-8.96-97.