

“O my son Sun”: Poem beginning “The”

Jeffrey Twitchell-Waas

“Poem beginning ‘The’” has been described aptly as Zukofsky’s “calling card” when in 1928 the young, unknown poet submitted it to Ezra Pound for publication in *The Exile*.¹ All things considered, the poem was certainly a personal success, immediately introducing him to a world of relatively established modernist poets and the promise of further publication. Recently the poem has attracted a disproportionate amount of critical attention primarily because it addresses the intersection of and tensions between modernism and Jewishness, as well as having the advantage of appearing more accessible than the rest of Zukofsky’s major poems. However, the common reading of the poem, as centrally concerned with a young Jewish poet who must assert his ethnic identity against prevailing modernist ideologies that would marginalize him, is untenable.² It would be more plausible to read the poem as leaving behind such an identity or as explaining why he has already done so: although he certainly does not reject his Jewishness as an inevitable part of his make-up and work, he does reject Jewishness as an identity out of which he consciously writes or that would frame how he is to be read. In “Poem beginning ‘The’” poetic modernism (and to a degree political modernism) offers a way out of this narrower self-definition.

A question that has not been asked is why “Poem beginning ‘The’” remains a one-off—there is almost nothing else like it in tone or manner in Zukofsky’s subsequent writing. One consequence is that whatever the intrinsic interest of the poem, it is a poor basis for making generalizations about Zukofsky’s poetry and attitudes. On the other hand, understanding why he promptly dropped this kind of poem may tell us something about the poetic values that would in fact form the basis of his life’s work. To begin, however, I want to consider a small batch of writings that come out of the same milieu as the publication of “Poem beginning ‘The,’” but which would almost entirely disappear from the official Zukofsky canon. This will offer some useful perspectives from which to consider our main poem, as well as the subsequent trajectory of Zukofsky’s poetry.³

I

As a follow-up to “Poem beginning ‘The,’” which appeared in *The Exile* 3 (Spring 1928), Pound was willing to include another substantial submission in the next issue of the journal, which would prove to be its last. Initially Zukofsky offered a group of poems under the general title “18 Poems to the Future” with a preface, but Pound was not enthusiastic and did not feel it was up to the standard set by “‘The’” (*EP/LZ* 7-8). In the end Pound published 13 pages of miscellaneous but predominately critical materials: a review of E.E. Cummings’ *HIM*, two verse essays (one a review of a performance of George Antheil’s *Ballet Mécanique*), a poem in memory of Lenin, plus the preface to “18 Poems to the Future.”⁴ These were pieces Zukofsky had on hand, all written 1925-1927 around the same time as the

¹ Barry Ahearn, *Zukofsky’s “A”*: *An Introduction* (1983): 37.

² This general assumption, more or less echoed by most subsequent readings of “Poem beginning ‘The,’” was first articulated in detail by John Tomas, “Portrait of the Artist as a Young Jew: Zukofsky’s ‘Poem beginning ‘The’” in Context,” *Sagetrieb* 9.1 & 2 (1990): 43-64.

³ Readers who would prefer to get immediately to the analysis of “Poem beginning ‘The’” can safely skip section I of the commentary.

⁴ *The Exile* 4 (Autumn 1928): 75-88.

composition but before the publication of “The.” Only slightly revised versions of the Lenin poem and the review of Cummings survived into Zukofsky’s subsequent book collections, which is notable given how little that Zukofsky allowed into print was rejected from his later collections, aside from a couple dozen short poems written before 1928, when he began “A”.⁵ Strictly in terms of their intrinsic merit, these are not works in need of recovery and for present purposes they will not be examined in detail. Nevertheless, I want to give quick descriptive characterizations to highlight a number of attitudes and modes of expression that will largely disappear from Zukofsky’s poetry, yet bear a family resemblance to the attitudinizing of “The.” Particularly notable is the relative aggressiveness, expressions of class resentment and sarcasm evident in these pieces. My general point is that at this time he was a young poet who, unsurprisingly, was trying on a number of modernist mannerisms in the process of finding out exactly what he wanted to do.

Taking these works as a whole, they evidence Zukofsky’s self-conscious concern with the socio-political and utopian function of poetry and art well before the onset of the Depression. We find here an assumption that will characterize his thinking throughout the rest of his life: that the individual is immanent in the world, embedded within various forces over which he has limited control and in large part are beyond his consciousness. His best-known formulation appeared in the “Program” to the “Objectivists” issue of *Poetry* (Feb. 1931): “[...] inextricably the direction of historic and contemporary particulars” (*Prep*+ 12), which here appears in such phrases as “the natural forces to come” in “Preface—1927” (*Exile* 78) or the “processes” of the Lenin poem (*CSP* 21), although it is implicit throughout. Political consciousness arises from the sense of limitation or obstruction such immanence inevitably implies, and our everyday negotiations in living. The roots of the aesthetic are bound up with the spontaneous desire to realize a sense of enlarged well-being, which is itself largely dependent on the social and material conditions within which one finds oneself. The aesthetic is always implicitly, if not explicitly social critique and the projection of utopian alternatives. At least this is what Zukofsky argues in the case of Cummings, whose work is pervasively satiric, but who nevertheless counters the mere wasteland negativity critiqued in the first part of “Poem beginning ‘The.’”

What is also notable, but distinct from his subsequent attitudes, is Zukofsky’s attraction to forms of an apocalyptic politics, a utopianism that assumes an absolute destruction of the old to make way for the new. This perspective is explicit in the evocation of John Bunyan and Georges Sorel in the two framing pieces, the review of Cummings and the Preface to “18 Poems to the Future.” The original title of the Cummings review, “Mr. Cummings and the Delectable Mountains,” specifically alludes to Bunyan’s post-millennium utopia, which as Zukofsky points out is taken from Cummings’ *The Enormous Room*, where *Pilgrim’s Progress* forms the allegorical skeleton of the narrative. In Cummings’ novel the Delectable Mountains are actually a few of the protagonist’s fellow prison inmates who embody an ethos of living as spontaneous creativity, although Zukofsky merely refers to these mountains as the utopian place or state of being Cummings’ work aspires to realize and against which the present “Slough of Despond” is critiqued. Whatever pessimism Cummings evidences in his various satirical jibs at contemporary society is counterbalanced or, perhaps better, is a trigger for vision, for glimpses of a redeemed alternative. Zukofsky explicitly equates the positions of Sorel and Bunyan in the preface for “18 Poems to the Future,” largely consisting of several quotations from each, and states that the former’s

⁵ The article on Cummings was lightly edited through deletions and the title changed for inclusion in *Prepositions* (1967), while Zukofsky also changed the title and dropped the epigraph to the Lenin poem by the time it was incorporated into *55 Poems* (published 1941, although gathered together by the mid-1930s).

“Revolutionary pessimism” expresses the general attitude or assumption of his own sequence of poems as a whole. Sorel’s pessimism is simply the insistence on the total destruction of the present order, rather than an outright nihilism, even though the sweeping away of the powers that be hardly guarantees the establishment of the desired socialist order. To each of the “18 Poems to the Future” Zukofsky attached as epigraphs quotations from *Pilgrim’s Progress*, drawing parallels between Bunyan’s work and contemporary realities. The only one of these to survive into Zukofsky’s collected short poems is that to “During the Passaic Strike of 1926”: “I was born indeed in your dominions, but your service was hard, and your wages such as a man could not live on” (CSP 26).⁶ This attraction to apocalyptic politics seems to have quickly abated, although there are some residual traces in the earliest movements of “A” written at the same time as these pieces came out in *The Exile* 4. “A”-1 concludes with lightning bolts and flaming pits from Bach’s *St. Matthew Passion*, which are echoed at least faintly in “A”-8 where both Lenin and Jefferson’s reflections on the practical preparations for revolution recognize the importance of the spontaneous spark, which is associated with electricity and lightning (“A” 53, 101-102). Judging from his correspondence, Zukofsky tended to be disparaging of the various American leftist organizations, especially leftist writers and intellectuals, and to insist that any worthwhile revolution would have to come directly from the workers themselves. Since he was never very sanguine about the chances of that possibility, one might say he maintained an attitude, at least privately, of revolutionary pessimism. Taking the broader and longer view, Zukofsky usually steered clear of such drastic and aggressive rhetoric.

The two verse essays included in *The Exile* 4 introduce an attitude of class resentment, adopting a sarcastic tone toward the moneyed class, who are referred to in the “Preface—1927” as “the economic appointors of my generation” (78). On graduating from Columbia with an MA in 1924, Zukofsky never managed to attain economic security until at least World War II, moving through a long list of low-paying and usually short-term jobs, and his circumstances were compounded by the constant need to help support the other members of his family (father and older siblings). Zukofsky did not require the Depression to become conscious of economic realities. The poet of “Preface—1927” sets himself implacably in opposition to the “appointors,” who would render him nameless, and driven by the “whip of my being” he recognizes the need to identify with his fellow have-nots to assert their presence—like “The” this poem begins with “I” and ends with “we.” The poem concludes with these outsiders pushing in at the doors of the “appointors” to force them to recognize the “damned” (80). This Rimbaudesque conclusion appropriately wraps up a fairly callow exercise, but our interest is in its relative violence, both in tone and imagery. The “Critique of Antheil” is a somewhat better performance, and it is easy to imagine parts of it being seamlessly incorporated into “Poem beginning ‘The.’” This is a response to the 10 April 1927 American premiere of George Antheil’s *Ballet Mécanique* and other works at Carnegie Hall, which was plagued by technical glitches and failed to provoke the desired

⁶ A typescript of “18 Poems to the Future” is preserved among the Pound papers at Yale. Aside from “During the Passaic Strike of 1926,” only two other poems from the sequence made it into print: slightly altered versions of “Stubbing the cloud-fields” (#11 in *55 Poems*) and “N.Y., 1927” published in *Nativity* 2 (Spring 1931) but never collected (reprinted in *The Correspondence of William Carlos Williams and Louis Zukofsky*, ed. Barry Ahearn (2003): 89-90). Although the poem to Lenin (“Memory of V. I. Ulianov”) published in *The Exile* 4 under the title “Constellation” includes an epigraph from Bunyan, it was not included in the sequence. Thanks to Barry Ahearn for information on “18 Poems to the Future.”

riots, as it had previously in Paris.⁷ Zukofsky's reaction to the performance is mixed. He says he bought a ticket from a scalper on the assumption that Antheil was a comrade in arms, both of them aspiring for "living's perfect form, the bloom significant" (81). But while the poet seems to approve of Antheil's frontal assault on his audience, he evidently finds the actual performance too gimmicky and dilettantish and in the end not really succeeding in its aim. Particularly since the *Ballet Mécanique* already had a certain notoriety that was elaborately enhanced by Antheil's flare for self-promotion, the fact that the performance was patronized by those it would affront exposed the already compromised situation of the avant-garde. Nevertheless, Zukofsky ends with a long and presumably approving catalogue of the music's attack on and exposure of its audience—a thumping imitation of Antheil's percussiveness—and then concludes with the poet looking down from the cheap seats and spitting into the pit where those who can afford it sit (84). This poem is perhaps of some interest because just a year later Zukofsky will begin "A" with the description of another very different musical performance. But there too can be heard notes of class resentment against the bourgeois audience and their superficial response to the music. Yet equally notable is the significant change in tone and handling, which in "A"-1 lacks the violence and overt sarcasm of the earlier critique. Interestingly, the act of spitting also reappears in "A"-1 as the poet leaves Carnegie Hall, but now explicitly as a simile set rather enigmatically within a quasi-cosmic setting and so presumably happening within the poet's imagination ("A" 2). The recuperation of the prior poem perhaps helps explain why the spitting appears in "A"-1, although it now seems to express a more universal disgust than specifically aimed at a given class.⁸ This is not to argue that Zukofsky in some sense transcended his class resentment, but that he recognized the limitations of its discourse or tone. Some years later in his article on Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times*, Zukofsky will criticize particularly the films of René Clair precisely because the class satire is too easy and pre-canned (*Prep*+ 59).

In the "Preface" for "18 Poems to the Future," Zukofsky mentions Sorel's sociological myth, the ideological bonding that prepares for possible revolution and a new social formation, indicating that the poems conceive of themselves within the terms of that task. Actually, it seems unlikely that the poems were written with such an intention in mind, and Pound specifically told Zukofsky that the poems failed to embody the new state of consciousness claimed by the "Preface" (*EP/LZ* 7-9). The poem on Lenin Pound did publish can plausibly be read as Sorelian in that it figures Lenin not as a specific individual but as a shooting star representing the future that pulls history in its wake, an allegorical figuration of "the direction of historic and contemporary particulars" within which any poet must work, whether consciously or not. It is not obvious how the title Zukofsky gave the poem for this publication, "Constellation," exactly relates to the poem, unless the implication is that the poet and others constellate with Lenin in the historical process that he exemplifies. The constellation image does reappear in a couple of the "18 Poems to the Future," emphatically so in the opening poem. Also a number of the poems adopt a similar hortatory style, so at odds with what we usually think of as the Zukofskian manner, which has its echo in the conclusion of "'The'" despite the latter's prevailing satire and ironies. The Lenin poem represents a strained rhetoric that Zukofsky will wrestle with in "'The,'" but thereafter will quickly jettison.

⁷ For a description and discussion of this concert, see Carol J. Oja, *Making Music Modern: New York in the 1920s* (Oxford University Press, 2000): 71-94. William Carlos Williams, who had not yet met Zukofsky, also attended the Antheil concert and reported on it in "Antheil and the Cantilène Critics"; see *Selected Essays* (1954): 57-61.

⁸ This detail is repeated in "A"-21 (450).

This miscellaneous batch of works suggests a young man who is working through rather than having sorted out his views both poetically and politically. In particular the relative prominence of aggressive rhetoric is hardly surprising for a young man trying on modernism—voices and styles he will evidently critique and largely shed once “The” was out of his system. While there are certainly various biographical factors—political, class, generational, ethnic, sexual—that feed into the specific tonal texture of “The,” we should keep in mind that inherited modernist attitudes and postures play a prominent role as well.

II

Since “Poem beginning ‘The’” more or less explicitly responds to *The Waste Land*, as well as to older modernists generally, most readings of the poem posit a monolithic concept of “modernism” as a well-defined body of work which Zukofsky must challenge to assert his own space and identity as a young Jewish poet. Above all the figure of T.S. Eliot as the modernist arbiter of a homogenous, Christian-centered culture, that is exclusionary and at least implicitly antisemitic has repeatedly been taken as the established context against which “The” is posed. However, this is anachronistic and opens the door to all manner of wishful projections, usually of a politically correct nature. The problem is less Zukofsky’s sense of belatedness than that of current literary criticism faced with a now thoroughly monumentalized conception of modernism. “The” was composed by a precocious 22 year old just four years after the publication of both *Ulysses* and *The Waste Land*, which had hardly yet achieved the monumental status that we tend to automatically assume. Despite the unquestionable splash *The Waste Land* made and Eliot’s rapidly growing recognition as an authoritative literary critic, it would still be a couple of years before his famous declaration in *For Lancelot Andrewes* (1928) as a cultural, religious and political conservative and the flurry of controversial cultural criticism that would follow. A sense of belatedness is of course pro forma for most young writers or humans generally with some sense of acquired history or culture. However, it was not so much that the achievements of the older modernists seemed to clutter the field, than that they had successfully blown open the possibilities for their younger advocates. The existence of “The” itself is evidence of this sense of liberation and permission, a poem remarkable for how confidently and ambitiously it took on the formal lessons of this new modernism, of which there is little hint in Zukofsky’s prior poetry.⁹ The

⁹ There has not been much examination of Zukofsky’s poetry prior to “Poem beginning ‘The,’” but it is evident that Zukofsky was trying out various formal and thematic possibilities during his early years. The poems he published before “The,” mostly in university literary magazines but some elsewhere, are generally conservative and derivative, but at the same time he was trying out more modernist styles, although he only published these poems some years later, if at all. A selection of early poems (1920-1924) survive in an unpublished collection of almost 60 poems, *The First Seasons* by “Dunn Wyth” (HRC 13.4). Predominately these are tentative attempts in a more modernist manner, and it is notable that few of the poems use the same form. The 1922 lyric “I Sent Thee Late” is the only poem from this collection to see print, first published in 1965 at Celia Zukofsky’s request and then incorporated into “A”-18 (CSP 3). This poem is interesting in that formally it is competently modernist, while its images and tone are clearly indebted to “Dover Beach”—in other words, it evidences the negativity Zukofsky will attempt to exorcize in “The.” None of these surviving early poems, more traditional or modernist, evidence any of the satiric and parodic proclivities of “The,” except for “(The Master Aristippus)” (1923) published with “Discarded Poems” in *Louis Zukofsky: Man and Poet*, ed. Carroll F. Terrell (1979): 146-148. In an initial stab at shaping a first book, Zukofsky handed over to his friend René Taupin in 1930 a bundle of 161 poems requesting that the latter wheedle it down to a selection of 50, at

list of poets mentioned or alluded to in the opening passage of “The”—Eliot, Pound, Moore, Cummings—is the same as the reading list he gives a few years later in the “Objectivists” program of contemporary American poets anyone must know, except that Williams (see below) and Stevens are missing (*Prep+* 189; see also “American Poetry 1920-1930,” *Prep+* 137-151). Not least of what Zukofsky inherits from his elders is an attitude of irreverence, satire and often bombastic critique. We can easily forget that the large majority of Pound’s Imagist period poems were satiric, as were most of Eliot’s early poetry through *The Waste Land*. The significant presence of satire in both the “Objectivists” issue of *Poetry* and *An “Objectivists” Anthology* (e.g. Robert McAlmon) tends to be ignored in current discussions. Satire, iconoclasm, irony and sarcasm were always at the heart of modernism, and there is little reason to wonder that Zukofsky so readily adopted such attitudes, almost de rigueur for any youthful artist in the modern era. Besides, irreverence is the easiest way for a young writer to write, taking pot shots at whatever seems staid or wittily turning others’ words against themselves. It is all but predictable that Zukofsky dedicates one of the more spirited movements of his poem to skewering his university experience. There is a certain amount of the smart aleck throughout the poem.

In an oft-quoted 1930 remark in a letter to Pound about “The,” Zukofsky confirms that the poem was a direct response to *The Waste Land*’s negativism in order to suggest that there is some hope for his own generation to come good (*EP/LZ* 78-79).¹⁰ These remarks were made some years after the poem’s composition and may reflect some of the anti-Eliot bias of Williams, who Zukofsky first met as a direct result of Pound’s publication of “The.” Williams is a notable absence from “The”’s opening catalogue of modernists, which may indicate that Zukofsky had yet to adequately size up this poet. Williams gave Zukofsky a copy of *Spring and All* when they met in April 1928 (*WCW/LZ* 6, *Prep+* 47), and the younger poet immediately recognized it as a seminal work of American poetry—in “Sincerity and Objectification” he would suggest it was the contemporary American equivalent of Wordsworth’s Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* (*Prep+* 198, “A”-17.378). But this was still to come at the time Zukofsky composed “The.” Nevertheless, given his own background he would have been sensitive to Eliot’s class pretenses and does appear to have anticipated Williams’ distaste for the latter’s tone and manner, as reflected in his scattered remarks on Eliot, almost always critical or at least qualifying, during the late 1920s and early 1930s.¹¹

the same time claiming he withheld over 800 others—even if this is hyperbole, it would appear that most of his earliest work has been (deliberately) lost. At this point he had in mind adding “The” and the first seven movements of “A” to fill out the volume (dated 23 Aug. 1930; thanks to Barry Ahearn). Besides the Lenin poem, there are quite a few poems written 1923-1926 included in *55 Poems* that are in a confident, and in some cases extreme, modernist manner.

¹⁰ Zukofsky makes similar remarks in the original version of “American Poetry 1920-1930,” *The Symposium* 2.1 (Jan. 1931), where he says that his poem was meant as a “reply to people concerned with the end of the world” (73).

¹¹ This is hardly surprising given that by this time both Pound and Williams were regularly taking pot shots at Eliot. There are not-so-subtle digs at Eliot throughout the original version of “American Poetry 1920-1930” (*Prep+* 138, 139, 144), even as *The Waste Land* is affirmed as a major achievement. See also the original version of “‘Recencies’ in Poetry” (1931), where Zukofsky makes some sharp remarks on Eliot as critic, as well as on an unnamed epigone (Allen Tate) (*Prep+* 204-206). In the latter, Zukofsky sarcastically points out the tone of cultural and class superiority Eliot tends to adopt, which also relates to his remarks on Eliot in “A Preface,” where he insists on a broad mixture of all discourses in contemporary poetry, including high and low (Krazy Kat, Negro Spirituals) culture (*Exile* 4, 86).

Still, there seems little reason not to accept his remarks to Pound as at least a partial explanation of his intent in “The,” and there he says nothing beyond his objection to *The Waste Land*’s negativity, an objection frequently made when the poem first appeared, even among the poem’s admirers.¹²

Zukofsky adds that it was more than a matter of *The Waste Land*’s argument but also the poetic manner: the melodramatic use of “Wagnarian leit motives” and what he refers to as Eliot’s “occasional slickness” (*EP/LZ* 78). One can already detect Zukofsky’s objections to what he will later refer to as “predatory intent” (*Prep+* 16, 18, 65), that is, a poetry that attempts to seduce the reader, most obviously through the use of poeticisms, the lulling creation of mood to which the reader surrenders. The evocation of Wagner here is apt—aside from Eliot’s repeated references to Wagner in his poem—and Zukofsky will never much care for the 19th century musical manner, preferring the technical intricacies of Baroque music. He tells Pound that “The” was composed more in terms of “sequential statement” and evokes the example of Pope, who we might normally think of as an exemplar of poetic slickness, but what Zukofsky has in mind is his poem’s overtly satiric and more argumentative manner (it is a curious coincidence that Pound edited out substantial passages from *The Waste Land* that imitated Pope). “The” is certainly a rambunctious poem, for which it is directly indebted not only to Eliot but to the whole range of modernist appropriations and razzle-dazzle, and despite its frequent use of quotations, it is more interested in sticking close to spoken American vernaculars than is the case with Eliot.

As far as Zukofsky’s critique of the older modernists is concerned, one could say he takes aim at their residual belatedness, aestheticism’s tone or attitude of world-weariness, of being born too late and the like so pervasive in the work of a previous generation—indeed an attitude heavily worked going back to at least *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* or, as Zukofsky suggests, Villon’s “where are the snows of yesteryear?” (line 21). This attitude is associated with an unresolved fixation on “dead mothers” (line 8). In this sense Zukofsky is simply extending and contributing to the older modernists’ own critique and very much in their own satiric and ironic manner. Zukofsky would continue this critique of what might be described as residual romanticism in the work of the elder modernists a few years later in “American Poetry 1920-1930,” although there his primary focus is less on themes or attitude than their technique of expression, that is, whether various poets have or have not eradicated the ghost of metered verse. Surely what Pound immediately appreciated in “The” was this irreverence that was integral to his own understanding of the “new.”

Nevertheless, moving beyond the opening movement of “The,” which explicitly addresses the older modernists, the poem continues to be haunted everywhere by waste land imagery: death, funerals, graves, deserts, autumn and so on. Many passages carry the tone and attitude of the drifting, alienated individual, as one might expect of a young writer of the time. “The” is a self-consciously adolescent poem written in the manner of disaffected youth but from the perspective of having already left that attitude behind. The reasons for doing so are the main argument of the poem. The generally satiric manner of the poem is able to generate iconoclastic negativity indefinitely, but is less convincingly able to pull itself out of its funk other than by the very verve of its satire and wit. The corrosiveness of the type of modernist poem Zukofsky takes on in “The” incessantly undermines itself and hardly allows for the realization of the more positive alternative for which it seems to be arguing and attempting to incorporate. The satire is always to a significant extent dependent on its targets, indicating its inability or at least the limitations to its ability to shake them off. One of my

¹² On the critical reception of *The Waste Land* and the early Eliot generally, see *T.S. Eliot: The Contemporary Reviews*, ed. Jewel Spears Brooker (2004) and *T.S. Eliot: The Critical Heritage*, Vol. 1, ed. Michael Grant (1982).

arguments is that this is in part why Zukofsky promptly dropped this kind of poetry, and thereafter satire and even irony rarely play more than quite localized roles in his work, particularly in “A”.

III

It has been pointed out that the word emphasized in Zukofsky’s title, “The,” is the first word of the title of Eliot’s poem.¹³ *The Waste Land* is not only one of the most famous titles in modern poetry, but it is also determinative: we know already in a general way what the theme and tone of the poem is to be and how we are expected to read it. One imagines that the innumerable readings of the poem can pretty much all be seen as essentially fugues on its title, explaining in one way or another what unfolds from it. Zukofsky’s title is a different story and tells us nothing about what to expect. Aside from being symptomatic of Zukofsky’s general distaste for thinking up titles (*SL* 232), this title simply directs us to the poem. A bit more than that clearly, since it points us to the words of the poem by singling out one of those words to which we normally do not pay special attention. If Eliot’s title tells us from the outset how to organize the multiple voices and pieces of his poem, Zukofsky’s, very characteristically, prefers to allow the reader and the body of the poem to find their own way and discourages a vantage from which everything can be seen in a single glance. “The” is a poem in which it is exceedingly difficult to contain the multiple ironies even while the poem seems to be making an argument. However, “The” is not entirely an empty signifier and suggests something specific, let’s say, “the poet” as opposed to “a poet,” which necessarily implies other poets. There is, everybody seems to agree, a particular poet speaking in this poem who even refers to himself as “Zukofsky” in the second movement. From this perspective, as I will get to in a moment, there is a reasonably clear narrative thread that organizes the poem and its argument. However, it is worth keeping in mind that this is a poem that tends to constantly undermine itself by self-consciously foregrounding its figuralness.

The notes included in parodic imitation of those added to *The Waste Land* cleverly conflate a number of different paratexts: dedication, notes and index.¹⁴ As the poem’s dedication, we are advised that it encompasses all those sources that have been forgotten as well as those noted. On the one hand, along with the overdone line numbers, Zukofsky is mocking the academic fustiness of Eliot’s book presentation of *The Waste Land*, itself a deadening gesture of monumentalizing with which Zukofsky’s poem is much concerned to counter. However, this dedication is the recognition that any poem is the sum of its sources, which are of course formal as much as merely textual. We have here what might be taken as the fundamental assumption behind the entire body of Zukofsky’s work because pared down to its essence his most persistent practice was to gather materials and then reassemble and rework them. This is the case with his major critical works as well as his poetry. One can perfectly well take this to be his strategy for fending off the anxiety of influence or the sense of belatedness, but then again one can equally see this as the lucid recognition that this is what all writers necessarily do anyway. But not only writers since there is no essential difference between the “labor” of “A”-8 or “composition” as living of “A”-12—we are always working with and negotiating what is already given. So the dedication states that the poem, like any poem is overdetermined. In the spirit of the poem generally, the notes are

¹³ Sandra Kumamoto Stanley, *Louis Zukofsky and the Transformation of a Modern American Poetics* (1994): 55.

¹⁴ Many years later, Zukofsky would remind correspondents that the notes/dedication should be part of the poem, particularly because when Pound reprinted “The” in his anthology of contemporary verse, *Profile* (1932), he left them out (*SL* 266, 272).

playful and less than entirely serious, as many have noted, and yet they seem never to have been taken quite seriously enough because in them Zukofsky gives strong indications of what to notice and how to read the poem. It is of course the nature of “The” and the source of its difficulties that everything is simultaneously mocking and serious in a way that makes it difficult to comfortably pin down the poem. This itself can be understood as a critique of Eliot’s apparent effort to control the unruliness of his poem through his notes—particularly the suggestion that Tiresias provides the viewpoint for the whole. In any case, “The”’s openness to all texts is central to the poem’s concerns.

The trajectory of the sketchy Bildungsroman narrative that underwrites “The” moves toward the conclusion where the poet breaks away from the mother and what she represents, including a specifically Jewish identity, to embrace the Sun which replaces his role as son. Zukofsky indicates clearly enough in his notes the centrality and meaning of these overriding figures or images.¹⁵ The mother represents all that would lay claim to the young poet or that which is already given: “Symbol of our relatively Most Permanent Self, Origin and Destiny” (CSP 8). The overall movement of the poem is not the rejection of but a departure from this mother in her myriad manifestations. The relationship of son is exchanged for that with the Sun, which according to the notes is the “Power of the Past, Present, and Future.” Power versus Permanence. When we see it like this then obviously this is not an either/or proposition, as the concepts necessarily define each other, and it is possible Zukofsky is already thinking in terms of a Spinozian model: Nature as created and Nature as creating. However, the task of the young poet is to assert as best he can his own powers over the inertia of things as they are, although things as they are is where and out of which the poet must manifest his powers. The image-word “sun” is ubiquitous throughout Zukofsky’s writings, and he seems never to have tired of playing with the pun sun/son—which he would be pleased to find later in Aristotle (see “A”-13.290.24). Generally the sun indicates the world where and in which we find ourselves, which is also the vision of the multiplicity of objects, the variety and density of which we are necessarily a part. Obviously within the context of “The” the sun also implies life and growth in opposition to the various waste land images that are a major target of the poem’s critique. I will need to flesh out and complicate these senses of mother and sun as we proceed, but glancing at the conclusion of the poem we find the poet taking leave of the mother to sing of the Sun, which is here called “Comrade” and associated with the reiterated term “myriad.” So the poet will fraternally embrace multiplicity and the hybrid over the various claims of the same. Nothing in “Poem beginning ‘The,’” however, is straight-forward, and I will return to the obvious problems this conclusion poses. Nevertheless, the mother-son/sun axis offers a loose framework within which the thematic or argumentative concerns of the poem operate.

It is the issue of Jewishness or more precisely of the intersection of Jewishness with modernism that is the primary reason why “The” has attracted critical attention in recent decades, and in this respect the poem seems tailor-made for readers interested in questions of identity politics. Generally speaking Jewishness is identified with the demands of the mother and so something the poet must break from but not forget (repress). As already implied, the common view that “The” assumes the young poet would be excluded by the older modernists because he is Jewish does not hold much water. As is well-known, Zukofsky had more trouble getting into Jewish journals than being accepted by established modernists.¹⁶

¹⁵ In a 26 May 1961 letter to Babette Deutsch, Zukofsky remarks that the most important notes are those to horses, Obvious, Sun and mother (SL 272).

¹⁶ On Zukofsky’s unhappy relations with the *Menorah Journal*, see Stephen Fredman, *A Menorah for Athena: Charles Reznikoff and the Jewish dilemmas of Objectivist Poetry* (2001): 124-126.

One of the seminal works of those modernists sympathetically presents a Jewish protagonist as something of a prototype of the modern, and in many respects Joyce himself offered a model with which Zukofsky could identify. Whatever the particular cultural agendas the likes of Eliot and Pound developed, Zukofsky could not have seen the new poetry as other than primarily expansive and inclusive. Again, as “The” itself amply demonstrates, the modernist manner allows in anything. Even if specific writers might have their biases and exclusions—and no doubt the very openness of modernist forms did unnerve a good many of their proponents—how could a young poet read *The Waste Land*, *Ulysses*, *Mauberry*, Moore and Cummings hot-off-the-press and not recognize the implied permission to use any materials whatsoever? The campaign for free verse, so crucial behind all this, precisely broke open any limits to the vernaculars that could now come into poetry, including the disjunctive inclusion of quotations from anywhere (cf. Moore) and the mimicry of both high and low culture discourses (Cummings, an important poet for the young Zukofsky). One imagines that it is this point above all that allowed Zukofsky to suddenly compose “The,” which essentially cobbles together bits and pieces from all over, including for example Yehoash, a poet he had been translating for some years.¹⁷

With regard to the Bildungsroman aspect of the poem, Jewishness is clearly a key issue that Zukofsky needs to work through. At the end of the first movement appears the first explicit personal mention of this issue beginning “Let me be” (line 54). The problem in interpreting this passage lies in determining who the poet is addressing. I cannot make much sense of this passage by identifying the addressee as the older modernists, and it seems more sensible to read it as addressed to the mother or the “Rabbaisi” of line 59, who presumably would be associated with her. The tone of this segment is the poet ironically echoing the words of his mother or of the Jewish community. In this case the passage seems to be addressed to “we” Jews, who “after living” in America have failed to “live” in any spiritually meaningful sense and yet, it is implied, dare not follow the example of Spinoza to live outside the Jewish community. For what it is worth, this echoes the spiritual “void” of the Jewish fathers in “A”-4 (“A” 13). One can easily imagine this as the young Zukofsky’s response to a negative reaction to his proclaimed “fancy” for “letters” (line 57; I will return to the term

¹⁷ The earliest surviving letter by Zukofsky, dated 1920 when he was 16 and had just entered Columbia University, is a cover letter for a submission to *Poetry* of a translation of Yehoash (*SL* 22). Zukofsky does not appear to have been discouraged by the fact his translation was not accepted, and a few years later in 1924 *Poetry* would publish one of his early sonnets. Given the paucity of information on Zukofsky’s early life, we have little evidence on when and why he became interested in translating Yehoash, other than what we might find implied by his inclusion in “The” and “A”-4. There is also no evidence that he read other Yiddish poets, although it would be surprising if he did not. It is not difficult to understand his attraction, as Yehoash represents an accessible, soft modernism that included a cosmopolitan interest in diverse cultures. One can speculate that Yehoash played a significant role in Zukofsky’s transference from Yiddish to English: as a modern poet in his mother tongue, he would feel a degree of confidence as translator that quite possibly he did not in attempting his own modern verse in English, although he was clearly already composing plenty of more conventional poetry in English. The cover letter for his submission to *Poetry* in 1920 emphasizes that his translation attempts to reproduce the meters of the original, indicating the relative conservatism of Yehoash’s modernism and Zukofsky’s conception of translation. The letter also implies that he considers Yehoash a major contemporary poet who has yet to be adequately recognized beyond the confines of Yiddish readers, and so in the context of English something of young Zukofsky’s own discovery. As far as I know, we have no evidence that Zukofsky ever attempted to write in Yiddish.

“fancy” later). In correspondence Zukofsky mentions that his family, most of whom had little or no English, had no clue about his literary concerns, that it was an interest entirely beyond their comprehension, as is also indicated at line 240.¹⁸ Commentators on this passage have noted that Spinoza is a doubly exiled figure, which is plausible enough, although the specific addition of “Rabbaisi,” whether spoken by Spinoza or by the poet, emphasizes the excommunication of the young Spinoza from the Jewish community of Amsterdam, whereas the Dutch Christian society of the day was remarkably tolerant of Spinoza given the extremeness of his views. Spinoza took up the profession of lens grinding as a direct result of his excommunication, whereas previously he worked in the family business, so that he would be self-supporting and avoid any dependence on patronage (he famously turned down the offer of a prestigious professorship at the University of Heidelberg).

This passage concluding the first movement immediately follows the poet awaking from a dream or nightmare, which we can understand as the long catalog of modernist negativity with which the poem begins. This pastiche catalog is introduced as in the voice of “Jesus I. Rush,” a suggestive, if enigmatic, designation. Some have argued that this indicates the Christian nature of the modernist canon against which Zukofsky must assert his Jewishness. The manner of the name suggests a professional name or perhaps something like a salesman. The “I” indicates an ego formation possibly related to the Oedipal motif, but also as an initial “I.” certainly suggests a Jewish name: Israel, Isaac, Ishmail,.... Combined with “Rush” I cannot help but hear “Irish,” implying Joyce or the Jesuit educated Stephen Daedalus wandering in his wilderness. Does “Rush” suggest being in a hurry, or Old Testament rushes? It is a curious bundle of possibilities Zukofsky has tied up in this name, but whoever he is he sings the mother and this is clearly the problem. As we will see, lullabies sung by mothers to sons and the latter’s need to resist their siren-like call will figure prominently later in the poem. It is also worth noticing that this Jesus is specifically singing in the wilderness, which of course fits the situation recurrently described by the modernists, but this is itself a trope based on the Jews’ own wanderings in the wilderness—the theme of exile is of course central for both (but one notably absent in Zukofsky’s work¹⁹). It is important to recognize the analogical connection between the demands of Jewishness and the poem’s critique of the modernists, which is introduced as a residual fixation on the mother, on the dead past or the permanent. One might want to understand the world-weary negativity emblemized by *The Waste Land* as an incomplete mourning for the loss of the mother, or the inability to accept time and transience. In any case, what the poet of “The” is critiquing in the modernists is directly related to why he must leave the mother, but on the other hand it is the very permission offered by modernists, shed of their sense of belatedness, that allows and indeed necessitates leaving the mother. In fact the son has already left and the very

¹⁸ See 6 Jan. 1931 letter to Carl Rakosi (HRC 20.12). The exception was Zukofsky’s brother Morris Ephraim Zukowsky, who was the one family member who was comfortable in English, was interested in books (later he would be an unsuccessful bookshop owner), and took the young Louis to the Yiddish theater on weekends. Although details are lacking, Morris was apparently the black sheep of the family (see Mark Scroggins, *The Poem of a Life: A Biography of Louis Zukofsky* (2007): 17, 400).

¹⁹ It is true that the theme of exile appears in both “A”-4 in relation to the Jewish fathers and in “A”-12 in relation to Zukofsky’s own father, but my point is that Zukofsky himself never adopts this theme, role or attitude for himself or even as an adequate characterization of contemporary humankind generally. If in “A”-12 Zukofsky’s father is in various senses an exile, the point is that he nevertheless lived his life as if he was at home anywhere as opposed to the fathers in “A”-4 who live as if in exile anywhere (see commentaries on “A”-4 and “A”-12).

experience of modernism, so to speak, has irrevocably distanced the poet from the mother and Jewishness, as is manifest in the very possibility of the poem itself. Although the poem will conclude by taking leave of the mother, that leaving has already happened for the poet, otherwise this poem could not be written, so actually the poem is explaining that leaving fully aware the mother can never understand the explanation. After this initial introduction of the mother motif, it will go underground and only appear in some of its implied manifestations until the last two movements where the mother is explicitly the addressee.

The slipperiness of “The” and the danger of too eagerly projecting assumptions is evident in the case of line 68—“Somehow, in Germany, the Jew goat-song is unconvincing”—which understandably has been taken to refer to the rise of antisemitism and fascism in Germany, particularly since a few lines further there is a clear reference to Mussolini and his black shirts. Mussolini had effectively taken power with the March on Rome in 1922, but in Germany the Nazi Party, while expanding, was in 1926 still politically a small entity who few imagined could take national power, so whether Zukofsky or his readers would have been expected to have taken much notice at this time is difficult to judge. In this case, Zukofsky references the line to the Jewish writer Franz Werfel, whose Expressionist play *Goat-Song* created a sensation and was hotly debated when it opened with a big star cast in New York the year “The” was composed. Therefore the most straightforward reading of this line is that this particular Jewish play and perhaps Expressionism more generally was not very convincing. Presumably the immediately following line summarizes the epistemological assumptions behind such a play or its central figure: that of pure sensation, visions are merely the consequence of the perception of things. This is promptly opposed to the Greeks, here represented by a thumb-nail abstract of Platonic idealism. One imagines that Zukofsky is not suggesting that these antithetical positions encapsulate either Jewish culture (sensation) or classical Greek culture (idealism), much less advocating either as such, but is implying a preference for some more mediated, proportional and hybrid position. A number of commentators have argued that the reference to “Jew goat-song” is an attack on the stereotype of Jews as licentious, with implications of a more bestial nature. But stereotypes generally and of Jews in particular tend to be compendious and self-contradictory bundles that can too readily be pulled out for whatever purpose one likes, which is why they are so useful to bigots. Another stereotype is that the Jews are over-cerebral rendering Western culture intellectually anemic. Werfel’s title is meant to evoke the Greek etymology of “tragedy,” which also suggests why Zukofsky immediately sets up a comparison with the Greeks, but as far as the etymological link goes it too suggests that the ancient Greeks can be stereotyped as lustful bestial types, which of course was often true enough in the context of a Christian culture. The outing of the Dionysian side of classical Greek culture was well established and in vogue by this time. That Zukofsky gives a version of classical Greece as Platonic is to be taken ironically—such a view is precisely the bland generalization propagated by the professors who will be skewered in the fourth movement of the poem. All of this segment on drama follows from the flip remark or lyric from a pop song that love makes the world go round, where taking “love” as meaning “lust” manifests itself at the time (as now) in all manner of generalized discourses, whether it be Expressionism, Freudianism, paganism or “Jewishness.” Zukofsky was never attracted to libidinal explanations of human behavior, and his notes reference this pop song line to Dante, which of course is comical, except that Dante and his close associate Cavalcanti were important poets to the young Zukofsky—poets who demonstrated that “love” could be an entire cosmology or philosophy of the human that quite literally does make the world go round.

The mention of Mussolini’s “funereal” black shirts leads into an extended funeral song in memory of Zukofsky’s friend Ricky Chambers, who committed suicide in September 1926, presumably while Zukofsky was working on “The.” Although here he is not

specifically named as he is in “A”-3, I will refer to this as the Ricky passage.²⁰ The first line of this passage (line 76) refers to two languages, which in an immediate sense refers to the languages of the preceding phrases in English and Italian respectively, but then Zukofsky explicitly echoes the preceding epistemological passage already discussed (lines 71 and 77), which suggests that these two languages in another sense are sensation and idealism. What follows in the course of the Ricky passage is a reading of Ricky according to the perspective of pure sensation or naturalism that quickly folds back into idealism so that the two “languages” become inextricable and hybrid or endlessly reflect back on each other. The result is the passage itself, a poem to Ricky about life although Ricky is dead. The specific epistemological phrase Zukofsky echoes is from the Platonic perspective where things are mere shadows (line 71), so we first see the dead, merely material Ricky reduced to sod (with its suggestion of sob)—the sudden appearance of one and two word lines perhaps suggesting this attenuated condition. But put sod with sun and sky and you get growth, so Ricky sprouts. We might note that the image of Ricky in or as the sod that he once walked over anticipates the image of the concluding song of “The” where the shadows of the dead crawl beneath the feet (lines 319-320). One could summarize the theme of the entire poem as that the dead are not dead (an insistent concern throughout Zukofsky’s writing), and the question is how to make that a positive and empowering rather than debilitating condition. In any case, the Ricky passage plays out the implications of Ricky as alive in death so that he transcends being buried in the earth to become identified with the stars, that is, the totality of the world. As this threatens to become unadulterated idealism, or hyperbolic poetry, death’s more materialistic sense reasserts itself in the figure of old men, so that we (not only Ricky) are perhaps merely like plants that grow, change, die, question mark (lines 101-103). The passage is figural, is about the figural, so that these two languages are finally not antithetical philosophies or “truths,” but uses of language and what we make of it. Therefore *The Waste Land* is not an argument about the state of historical culture, but an embodiment and enactment of a negative condition of human possibilities. In that light, it can be countered. The conclusion of the Ricky passage will again pull away from the stark sensationist view, but in a distinctly more somber and cautious tone than the previous cosmic manner. It concludes with an expression of exasperation that can be understood as referring to Eliot and his like: they have scored a success by using the dead (of which here Ricky is emblematic) to express a radically naturalistic perspective where death is simply the end, but can this “death” be redeemed by taking advantage of their success? Although the second of these two lines (108-109) seems a simple reversal of the first, it is still challenging to make clear sense of it. However, for my purposes I would emphasize that the question here is what is to be made of the dead, which can never be simply left behind since they are in fact what we inherit and where we necessarily find ourselves.

Zukofsky now introduces the first of three translations from Yehoash that are interpolated into “The.” Before continuing, it is worth reminding ourselves that the Ricky and Yehoash passages are framed by a setting in which the poet, here explicitly named Zukofsky (line 130), and Peter Out are walking about and considering what theater performance they would like to see. This frame is highly satiric, flippant and even includes a dose of adolescent humor, if one is inclined to think of Peter Out as actually Zukofsky airing his or perhaps Eliot’s limp penis. Tonally this frame contrasts sharply with the inner Ricky and Yehoash passages which presumably are meant to be more positive, more sincere efforts to offer counter examples to Eliot’s negativism. As indicated, this is not easy and the Ricky passage’s self-conscious figuralness wobbles precariously in manner and ends with a

²⁰ In the original manuscript Zukofsky did explicitly refer to “Richard” and “Ricardo” (Scroggins, *The Poem of a Life* 54).

question mark. At this point the first rendition from Yehoash is introduced, presumably as another attempt to move beyond Eliot. However, it begins for all the world like an outtake from *The Waste Land*: images of death, blindness and the tell-tale adjective “dry,” all set in a desert scene. This is not promising. The rest of the passage, though, is a bit better, if only marginally so, as the Bedouin on his horse reclaims a kingdom of sorts. As Zukofsky renders it, this second part is put in the past prior to the dead end of the opening lines, and describes a kingdom of the Desert-Night, indicating it may be no more than a world of dreams, as in fact the details suggest.²¹ We can recognize the analogical relationship between Ricky and the Bedouin in that the latter (at least in memory-dreams) is also described as directly connected with the totality of his world, the mention of the heavens and stars echoing details from the prior Ricky passage. As such the Bedouin is a figure for presence in the world, a sense of fulfilled being in direct contrast to *The Waste Land*’s expression of a dissected shallow existence. Yet it is a vision of presence strongly hemmed in by the reality of the desert, and given the central importance of the sun image in “The” as a whole, a night-time kingdom can hardly be reassuring. Again we notice the “two languages” or perspectives discussed in relation to the Ricky passage: the pure sensationist or naturalist perspective of nothing but transitory existence ending in physical death contrasted with a more Platonically inflected vision that would perceive a kingdom in or poised against the desert. Again this is not so much a matter of alternative philosophical or perceptual positions or “truths,” as it is a question of a poetic language that goes beyond mere assertion, which will always be hemmed in by its negation, for a language that somehow embodies and enacts a sense of presence. Indeed, at this point the movement returns to the frame setting and a catalog of flip titles of Broadway acts that gesture at various symptoms and texts of an anemic state of existence and culture. Peter Out himself is even so light-weight that he cannot qualify as a postman, much less a soldier, as Zukofsky mocks stereotypical measures of manliness and substance.²²

The titillating faux titles with which the second movement ends lead into the short third movement whose title makes explicit its musical purpose as a tonal variation, a more purely lyrical interlude in contrast to the discursive tendencies of the others. As with the Bedouin passage we are again in a night world, this time of prowling horny tomcats, whose movements seem purposeless beyond mere lust but might suggest a hint of desire to find a way out of their narrow circular existence. They do not appear to be very happy prowlers as they are weeping (line 159) and evidently look forward to the rise of the sun in whose warmth they can run. After all the night imagery of this and the preceding movements, this mention of the sun is significant since it is the image toward which the entire poem is tending, so appropriately the sun will rise with increasing insistence throughout the remainder of the poem, even while it is not easy to shake off the night.

The fourth movement immediately picks up on the sun, but now in the language of advertising. The movement as a whole, one of the best known segments of “The,” is neatly structured with a frame spoken by one of Zukofsky’s Columbia University professors and an inner part consisting of a parodic reworking of Edgar Allan Poe’s “Helen” that is spoken by the poet-student. The professor speaks in the voice of an ad man selling the classics cheap and regurgitating hollow formulas, such as the off-the-cuff remark on “Plato’s Philo” (line 167). Tomas’ often repeated annotation that Philo’s effort to synthesize Judaic and Greek philosophical traditions made him a traitor in Jewish eyes seems a reductive generalization,

²¹ A full translation of the poem, “Bakhr Esh-Shaytan,” from which Zukofsky renders only the last part, can be found in *Sing, Stranger: A Century of American Yiddish Poetry: A Historical Anthology*, eds. Benjamin & Barbara Harshav (2006): 110-112.

²² Zukofsky himself was always very thin and light-weight, usually well under 120 pounds, a fact he often refers to in correspondence (*SL* 76, 114, 196, 218; *EP/LZ* 213).

and in any case there is little reason to assume Zukofsky would simply have taken onboard such an assessment (54). It is more straightforward to take Philo as a figure for the effort to meld together the Judaic and Greek, a hybrid figure that represents a possible model for the young Zukofsky. Put into the mouth of Zukofsky's professor, the reference to Philo takes on a decidedly antisemitic inflection: Philo is a mere derivative Platonic wannabe. This is apiece with the academic superficiality that is the primary target of this entire movement, but the common claim for an implied critique of a classically based curriculum that would exclude the Judaic has been overstated. Although it is difficult to be certain, it is commonly assumed that Zukofsky's reference at line 163 is to the Great Books Program initiated by John Erskine at Columbia in 1920 and that such a curriculum, with its stress on Western classics, was inimical to Jewish traditions and is implicitly analogous to the cultural vision propagated by Eliot.²³ That Zukofsky feels some animus toward Erskine's superficiality and bland antisemitism is certainly true, but such a tendentious characterization of the Great Books Program is hardly useful.²⁴ With regard to Zukofsky and the classics, it is difficult to think of

²³ Virtually every commentator on "The" has asserted that Zukofsky's reference at line 163 to "Askforaclassic, Inc." designates the Great Books Program, but especially since such weighty arguments have been built on this assumption, it is worth pointing out that this is not certain. While Zukofsky explicitly notes another of Columbia's educational innovations, the University Extension (adult education), there is no such note for the Great Books, but given that he does note John Erskine as the professor speaking in the fifth movement, this has understandably been taken as sufficient to make the former identification as well. However, at the time "The" was composed and published, it is unlikely that outside of Columbia many people, presumably including Zukofsky's potential readers, would have associated Erskine with the Great Books Program, which had only just got going and was hardly firmly established even at Columbia—it was in fact suspended there in 1928. The energetic Erskine was a man of many hats, one of which was that of a popular novelist and the year before the composition of "The" he published a best-seller, *The Private Life of Helen of Troy*, which was publicly condemned as salacious by a prominent Rabbi as well as charged with vulgarization by conservative classicists. Middle-brow readers ate it up, and it was promptly turned into a successful Hollywood movie. Erskine followed this up with further novels in a similar vein that took classical literary characters into whose mouths are put very modern speech and issues. Zukofsky's scattered references to Erskine in the correspondence that I have seen are invariably sarcastic, and he once mentions that Erskine never forgave him for turning down an invitation to speak before the Poetry Society of America, in which Erskine was very active (letter to René Taupin, dated 17 Jan. 1931). Another unpublished letter to Pound suggests that the bits of vernacular speech ("don'chewknow") put in Erskine's mouth in fact attempt to mimic his manner (dated 6 March 1931).

²⁴ The common assumption of commentators on "The" is that the Great Books Program was a conservative defense of a narrowly conceived Western canon, but within the context of its times this is inadequate. Under the long presidency of Nicholas Murray Butler (1901-1945), Columbia was a pioneering and experimental lab for innovations in higher education that we, if we are American, have long taken for granted, particularly the core curriculum and its associated concept of electives, as well as adult education (noted by Zukofsky as University Extension at line 70). The core curriculum was specifically developed against a curriculum that tended to emphasize specialization and the relative distinction between fields of study, which was and to a large extent still is the European model. The core, so to speak, of this latter model was a properly classical education, which meant learning Greek and Latin and reading the classics in their original language. This was more the philological model within which Pound and Eliot were educated. The Great Books program was developed within the

any other modern American poet who so studiously stuck to the classics throughout his life and rarely read anything that would not fit comfortably into the accepted syllabus. Pound may have been losing sleep over whether the classics were being read, but he spent a great deal of time and effort ferreting out all manner of oddities that had unjustly been forgotten or actively repressed, but this sort of research and discovery never interested Zukofsky. Taking an overall view, his use of specifically Jewish materials is notable for their paucity. He was an assiduous reader of the Bible as a classic, but was content with the King James Version, and only picked up some Hebrew versions later in life as he became enthusiastic about the possibilities of homophonic translations. Of course for Zukofsky it is less a matter of what he read than how he read and put that reading to use.

These incomplete observations are merely meant to question the common assumption that the young Zukofsky saw himself as alienated and excluded from the established literary canon in English and that this is a pivotal concern of “The.” Of course I have yet to tackle the crucial passage relative to this topic, which I will get to in a moment. In the fourth movement, however, Zukofsky is mainly concerned not with a too narrow focus on a classical conception of the canon, but a debased understanding and teaching of that canon, which is why Zukofsky pitches Erskine’s words as marketing talk as he notes in his notes. This is simply another symptom of an enervated cultural scene and a monumentalized handling of tradition, against which modernism posed itself. Although many commentators have tended to align Erskine’s supposed propagation of a narrow classical curriculum with Eliot’s advocacy of Western Christian culture, it would make more sense to see Eliot and the older modernists generally, none of whom surely would be considered on Erskine’s syllabus, as precisely the promise of an alternative to such a mummified handling of the textual heritage. However much Zukofsky reacted against Eliot’s thematic negativity, the actual handling of texts in *The Waste Land* could hardly be seen as other than an emphatic challenge to the college classroom approach and as inclusive, allowing the juxtaposition of all manner of texts that would normally be kept politely distinct. The title of the fourth movement refers to Walter Pater’s *The Renaissance*, who is also mentioned as well as alluded to in what follows. Pater (as well as Poe) might very well be taken as associated with a world weary aestheticism whose unfortunate residual effect is manifest in the negativity of *The Waste Land* and other modernist writers. However, Pater was also seen as a radical, even dangerous writer in his own time, whose famous conclusion to *The Renaissance* called for a sense of aliveness, that famous “gem-like flame” that would seem to have entirely petered out in the

general concept of the core curriculum and offered the classics in translation in classes that emphasized discussion over lectures. It was introduced as part of the Honors program by Erskine in 1920, the same year as Zukofsky entered Columbia, but its ideology of generalized (non-specialized) knowledge and classics in translation remained controversial. The list of classics went up to 1800 (later extended into the 20th century), and included many works of science and mathematics. If Zukofsky in fact took the Great Books Program, it is quite possible he first encountered Spinoza there. In this light, whatever the obvious limitations of the program from our current perspective, it cannot simplistically be conflated with, for example, the vision of culture propagated by Eliot. One might argue that if Zukofsky’s quip is in fact aimed at the Great Books Program, it indicates a reactionary preference for the old classical education, although it is doubtful this is what he intended. More plausibly, one might argue that over the course of time Zukofsky would develop some elaborate means of compensating for his lack of a classical education, as manifest most obviously in *Catullus* and “A”-21. See Timothy P. Cross, *An Oasis of Order: The Core Curriculum at Columbia College* (1995): <<http://www.college.columbia.edu/core/oasis>>, particularly chapters 1 and 2, the latter on the Great Books Program.

world described by *The Waste Land*. One can imagine (many of us have experienced) Pater being taught with little sense of the ethical challenge he intended to pose, which is one way to summarize the general concern of this movement. One can also imagine Zukofsky sitting bored in the back of the classroom while Prof. Erskine drones on and keeping himself amused by composing the Poe pastiche that makes up the center of this movement. Funny it is, but not much of a revival of Pater's spirit upon which a new Renaissance might be possible.²⁵

The final two climatic movements of "The" address the mother directly, whose presence up to now has remained largely implied as the general principle of the "permanent." As such, the mother is addressed in a tone that blends or alternates between tenderness and resentment, but the narrative logic is that she must be broken away from.²⁶ The fifth movement opens with a nostalgic image of his younger parents framed within a revision of a famous *carpe diem* lyric by Robert Herrick with the line: "Gather ye rosebuds while ye may." Some have interpreted this as an idyllic memory prior to the indignities of immigration and life in an antisemitic America, but it is difficult not to hear heavy ironies in Zukofsky's change of rosebuds for mushrooms and the incongruous class inflection in the reference to his father as "boating." That the poet is actually distancing himself from his parents is evident in what follows: first a line about a burning stove compared with a full moon on a desert night—again that incessant recurrence of the desert and night. Then the only actual bit of Yiddish that appears in "The," which translates literally as "the house is cold" (line 191). Zukofsky notes that this phrase is from a "Jewish Folk Song," and it is in fact from a very well-known Yiddish lullaby whose popular title is simply the first phrase of the song, "On the hearth." As this title suggests, the song opens in a cozy setting with a fire on the hearth so that the house is hot and continues with a description of children being taught the Hebrew alphabet. Zukofsky's slight but decisive alteration—the house is cold rather than hot—completely turns the sense of this song on its head, and he has absolutely no interest in pursuing this tradition of knowledge. More to the point, the Yiddish hearth and home is cold. This Yiddish phrase is immediately followed by an image put into the mind of the mother of a new grave on which the blades of grass sinisterly become, in the night, bayonets—perhaps transformed by that full moon that is a cold burning stove on the hearth. It is hard to imagine that Zukofsky could be more blunt here. The claims of the mother and of the hearth, which are the claims of Jewishness and Yiddish, threaten to suffocate the poet. The poet does not necessarily need or want to simply reject his Jewish-Yiddish heritage, but the mother represents those demands of that heritage that merely and dogmatically repeat a specific way of life and its options. Such a view of that heritage has no room for, cannot even recognize Bach and Shakespeare, as the poet mentions later in the movement. This is not merely a

²⁵ Scroggins detects the strong presence of Pater in the poetry Zukofsky published during his Columbia days; see *The Poem of a Life* 33-34.

²⁶ As Scroggins points out, during the time Zukofsky was composing "The" in the later months of 1926, his mother was seriously ill and would die near the end of January 1927. Given that his father worked very long hours including night shifts, it was his mother who was the main figure in his early life and her death in 1927 was a major emotional event (*The Poem of a Life* 60). This is indicated by the prominence of the mother in both "The" and *Arise, Arise*, in which the mother figure is sick and dies in the course of the play, whereas the father rarely appears in Zukofsky's early work. The circumstances no doubt lent emotional urgency to the need for Zukofsky to explain himself despite knowing his mother could hardly grasp what he was about. In addressing her in his first major poem, there is a strong sense of the eulogistic despite differences. There are more than half a dozen published, but mostly uncollected poems written in the aftermath of his mother's death that obliquely refer to this event—five of these are sonnets.

matter of his mother being limited to Yiddish, which one would think would not prevent her from singing and understanding Bach's German, and one of the few details about his youth that Zukofsky liked to mention was that his own introduction to Shakespeare and other classics of the West were through Yiddish performances.²⁷ The point is that Bach and Shakespeare and all that they imply is entirely outside the mental universe of what his mother represents, and as such he cannot hope to even explain to her why they are now a part of his mental and emotional world. If the poet is satirizing the mother's nostalgic and pastoral memories of her youth back in the old world, he bluntly brings her back to the stark urban reality of their present (line 196), while at the same time reminding her that her old Russia is now a new Soviet Union (line 197). In this complicated passage, Zukofsky opens and repeats the line, "Speaking about epics, mother" (lines 186, 195), which obviously echoes the conclusion of the preceding movement where Erskine is droning on about Poe's argument that an epic poem is an oxymoron. The implication may be that the lyrical, for Poe the only properly poetic form, is grounded in the personal, the immediately felt, and by extension in the hearth, whereas the epic is a more distanced perspective, one that can include the hearth, but which by its very distancing from it can no longer be bound by it and therefore takes in others and expresses a hybrid sense of community. Put another way, it is the epic perspective that allows for the possibility of a poem like "The"—not least its multiple ironies.²⁸ This is a perspective that is also more objective in the sense of taking on a more realistic or historical view, as opposed to a relatively subjective perspective constantly overlain with nostalgic washes. Having achieved some distance from the hearth, the poet then asks, through the help of a quotation from Max Stirner's once famous *The Ego and His Own* (1844), whether this means he has merely landed in an egotistical position, which is counterbalanced by again alluding to the Russian Revolution as hinting at a different option (line 203).

The overall structure of the fifth movement matches that of the second: there is a frame largely defined by an identified interlocutor (Peter Out, the mother), constructed out of various quotations thick with ironies, within which are two longish passages in each case consisting of a rendition of Yehoash and another passage presumably Zukofsky's own. As noted previously, these inner passages are largely free of the irony and satire that characterizes the framing segments and presumably represent an attempt to offer a more positive expression against Eliot's negativity, which also has analogies with the cultural stagnation of the poet's familial background. With regard to Zukofsky's use of Yehoash as well as other explicitly Jewish materials, he makes some quite deliberate alterations that need careful consideration. We noted that in the Bedouin passage Zukofsky carefully puts the vision of the night kingdom into the past, prior to the deathly images with which it opens; in the fifth movement he switches the order of the two stanzas of Yehoash's poem; while in the concluding movement it has been often noted on the authority of Harold Schimmel that Zukofsky substitutes "we" for Yehoash's "I."²⁹ If Yehoash is intended to offer something more positive, it again looks somewhat tentative as the poem in movement five is clearly autumnal, opening with wild geese being questioned as to whether they know the way forward and, significantly, if they know where "our sun" has gone. In the second part (first in Yehoash's original, beginning at line 211) the poet is down in the woods described in dreary

²⁷ Zukofsky, *Autobiography* (1970): 33.

²⁸ Zukofsky lists "The" as an example of the "complexity" of the contemporary epic in "Recencies' in Poetry" (1931) (*Prep+* 214).

²⁹ Harold Schimmel, "Zuk. Yehoash David Rex." *Louis Zukofsky: Man and Poet*, ed. Carroll F. Terrell (1979): 244. The switching around of Yehoash's stanzas in the fifth movement appears to have been a last minute decision (*EP/LZ* 4, 6).

terms and concluding with an image of an old horse.³⁰ The original order of the stanzas suggests that the poet ends by looking up for a possible way out of the woods and the world in which he feels entrapped, whereas Zukofsky's order moves in the opposite direction, but allows him then to continue with the horse image in an effort to offer an alternative. Immediately the old horse becomes plural, energetic and matched in pairs, living in and under the protection of the Sun, to which Zukofsky's passage is addressed in a praise song. Indeed the reiterated address to the "Lord" clearly suggests the model of the Psalms. So we have here a utopian vision where the horses have escaped the impasse where "we" are struck and the song sings "against autumn" (line 237). It is worth recalling the similarity with the second movement where we found this alteration between a perspective emphasizing mortality and absolute death and a more rhetorically allegorical mode where those very images of morality are transformed into something more extravagantly positive. But then their very lift-off from the ground, so to speak, opens up doubts, and as in the earlier movement questions begin creeping in. The poet introduces the niggler of Chance, that perhaps order, beauty, happiness, the very grounds of poetic desire are mere happenstance, and that this "Lord" prefers to remain down below where we fuss. In other words, the Sun or Lord, as a figure of possible order—metaphysical, aesthetic, moral, political—is merely that, nothing but a figment of our own fussing. In which case these horses would have to be weeded out and were never alive (lines 235-236), and we end up back in the wilderness-woods. The sentence introducing Chance is peculiarly convoluted (lines 232-234), even by Zukofskian standards, and deliberately disintegrates the singing manner set up in the prior lines—the song falters. We now return back to the frame, with the poet speculating as to whether horses might sing Bach, which for a moment they just have. In the context of the larger argument of this movement, the poet (horse) cannot sing without breaking from the comforting confines of the hearth.

We now come to the final passage of the fifth movement, arguably the best known of the poem, in which the poet most explicitly confronts the problem of his identities as a Jew and a poet. Leading up to the remarks on assimilation, the passage raises, somewhat puzzlingly, the issue of color as an ethnic marker. First there is the image of yellow-faced Chinese who Zukofsky notes refer to "The Yellow Menace," and then an odd exchange with an immigrant cousin. The immigrant cousin is said to have more color in her cheeks than the whites (Angles), punningly associated with angels to up the racist stereotyping, and then the poet adds they ought to get more color too.³¹ The tone here is savagely ironic and the cousin's "color" suggests she is whiter than the whites, although it can be read in precisely the opposite sense as well. Aside from the obvious reference to the most evident symptom of a racist society, this concern with color seems to be directed back at the mother or in any case to the common phenomena of those discriminated against taking on the very racism of the host society against other ethnicities toward whom they can feel a sense of superiority.³² Typically the remark that they (the mother and the poet) ought to get more color could be read as sarcastically suggesting there ought to be more ethnicities. All of this makes the most sense if we imagine that the poet is arguing with his mother, as well as with the dominant

³⁰ Another translation of Yehoash's poem can be found in *Sing, Stranger* (2006): 101-102.

³¹ For this line punning on Angles and Angels (repeated at line 291), Zukofsky notes the Venerable Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*, in which can be found a story about Pope Gregory I that implicitly explains why he sent the first missions to Christianize Britain. One day on seeing some attractive, light-skinned boy slaves on sale in the market, Gregory inquired about them, and on being told they were Angles, exclaimed that of course such "fair" people would be named after the angels and lamented that they were still pagans.

³² New York's Chinatown was just a few blocks from where Zukofsky grew up on Chrystie Street in the Lower East Side.

racism that by implication he is accusing her of mimicking. The poet pointedly plays with the senses of having enough color and having enough material or social success. The poet asks why the “representatives” of the Jews are always “hankering for food” (line 243). The son remarks that despite the hankerings of the “representatives” of the Jews, they (the poet’s family) have little to show for it—the aspiration for a materially better life that presumably motivated them to immigrate in the first place has paid meager dividends. Obviously this food can be understood in both material and spiritual terms, with the former including economic and social success. The split meanings of “food” here reflect the different perspectives of mother and son, the latter starving for something other than her socio-material ideas of success. This sense of cultural poverty is presumably the point of the odd exchange with the cousin, although the ironies are compounded here in that the poet’s baiting question about Trotsky is made with an overtly arch drawl that is, as Zukofsky notes, ventriloquized through a Max Beerbohm satire on blue stockings. At this point the poet is mocking himself as much as anyone else. This then leads into the poet’s assertion that assimilation is easy once you have lost your faith, particularly since the color question is apparently not much of an issue for Jews who want to “pass.”

The assimilation passage in which the poet takes on the voice of Shylock has usually been understood as an assertion of Zukofsky’s Jewishness which he will maintain by mastering and outdoing the literary game designed by the dominant (white) Western culture. In this way he will exact a type of revenge. This is what, as Shylock, he says, but Shylock, even in his sympathetic modern guises, is a tricky role to adopt—not least because he is a Jew created by a non-Jew. Is taking on the role of Shylock taking on the role of a Christian itself learning the tricks of the dominant culture? Within the relevant context here, that of the literary field, the poet will succeed by mastering the given rules of the game, which is the same as saying he becomes thoroughly assimilated—from the standpoint of his Jewishness, a Pyrrhic victory. It is difficult to imagine what the suggestion of revenge might mean in this context. If it means making room for Jewish materials, Yehoash for example, I have already argued that modernism in fact allows for such inclusions, as “The” itself demonstrates. A useful example here might be Joyce, who explicitly declares that he is writing in the language of the colonizer, but commands their game to incorporate all manner of Irish materials both high and low—all the time unable to stand living in Ireland and never tiring of mocking the Irish for their maudlin pretenses (maintaining his epic distance). One problem with taking this view of Zukofsky, however, is that moving beyond “The” explicitly Jewish materials and concerns simply do not play a very prominent role in his considerable body of writing and certainly not something he compulsively returns to in the manner of Joyce—which is not to say they do not appear significantly enough, as do the Greeks and Shakespeare and.... In the various Yehoash translations that Zukofsky included prominently in both “The” and “A”-4, none of them give a hint of specific Jewishness. But more to the point, by being Englished and contextualized in Zukofsky’s modernist constructions they have been thoroughly assimilated. It would have required little effort for him to signal their Jewishness or even Yiddishness if he had cared to, but other than noting the name Yehoash to indicate that they are translations and in this sense his discovery, he does not.³³

³³ In fact, of the various renditions Zukofsky made from Yehoash, the two poems that have the clearest cultural markers are versions or imitations of Japanese (in “A”-4) and Arabic, whereas in at least one instance Zukofsky appears to have erased Biblical imagery in his translation (see commentary on “A”-4). Stephen Fredman has made the argument, tacitly assumed by many other commentators on “The,” that during the time we are concerned with Zukofsky was poised between the career choices of being a Jewish poet in the manner of Charles Reznikoff or an avant-garde modernist in the manner of Pound, and that the *Menorah*

Still, of course, the issue of Jewishness is explicitly and prominently raised by Zukofsky in “The” (and “A”-4). The Shylock passage makes most sense, if we keep in mind that this entire segment is addressed to the mother in perhaps a heated manner as a somewhat exasperated attempt by the poet to explain to her why he must, so to speak, go over to the gentiles—exasperated because he knows that the very reasons are not within her comprehension. The movement concludes with a couple of quotations from Heinrich Heine—the first a proud assertion of Jewishness, which in the context of Heine’s ballad is spoken to a comically virulent antisemite who has fallen in love with our hero unaware of his ethnicity. But Zukofsky immediately pulls the rug from under this declaration by interpolating that the Rabbis could care less, which chimes with the earlier reference to “Rabbaisi” in relation to Spinoza. Then he returns to Heine with a famous line in the original German that means, “no kadish will be said (when I die),” because the poet, spiritually speaking, is no longer Jewish (and so the Rabbis no longer care). The use of Heine here and again in the final movement is obviously not happenstance. As a secular Jew who converted to Christianity, Heine, like Spinoza, is a pariah from a more orthodox Jewish perspective, and this too is why no kadish will be said for him. On the other hand, it is certainly Heine who, in the name of the integrity of his verse, asserts his identity as a Jew against the allegorically seductive figure of anti-semitic culture—although again this did not necessarily persuade the Rabbis. As we will see in a moment, Zukofsky will both identify with and distance himself from Heine. Zukofsky certainly is a son of Israel by blood and with that comes inexorably all manner of inheritances, but these do not include the demands to be “Jewish” as determined by the expectations of all that the mother represents.

Immediately following and in some sense counterbalancing the Shylock quotation is another also from *The Merchant of Venice*, a famous song offering a definition of fancy. It may not be happenstance that Coleridge is mentioned just a few lines previous since his own remarks on fancy are certainly the most influential in English literature. Coleridge of course defined fancy as an inferior and artificial faculty compared with the creative Imagination. In the extract from the song Zukofsky gives, the emphasis is on fancy being engendered by the eyes and that it dies in the cradle. In the larger context of this passage, the primary instance of seeing has been related to ethnic color, which suggests ethnic fantasies that lie at the heart of racism. But why does fancy die in the cradle? Because there are no such pernicious fancies in

Journal’s rejection of his article on Reznikoff (later published in shorter form as “Sincerity and Objectification”) tilted him toward the latter path. I do not see much plausibility in this claim, although one can understand why Fredman wants to make it within the context of his specific concerns and arguments (*A Menorah for Athena* 124-127). Zukofsky obviously admired Reznikoff and believed he was a poet worth publicizing, but the choice of submitting the article to the *Menorah Journal* would have been determined most likely by the fact that it was the only suitable publication whose readership might be expected to have heard of Reznikoff and therefore might be willing to publish it. Possibly a key reason that the *Menorah Journal* did not accept it is that Zukofsky studiously avoids discussing Reznikoff as a Jewish poet or dealing with any of the specifically Jewish themes of his work. There is an interesting note of appreciation Zukofsky sent Reznikoff dated 9 Nov. 1949 to express his admiration of a poem he had read in *Commentary*, the Jewish political-cultural magazine representing at that time a liberal, anti-communist perspective. Zukofsky notes first how Reznikoff’s poem, explicitly Jewish, could teach Eliot something about culture and religion, and then adds that *Commentary* usually “scares” him but he had looked at this issue by chance in a library (*SL* 206). The implication is that Zukofsky felt distant, even alienated from debates on specifically Jewish issues and identities, but that of course he did understand and appreciate Reznikoff as a self-consciously Jewish poet.

the infant—they are learned? Is the juxtaposition of death and cradle a synecdoche for mortality, that realism that counters fancy and levels all humans? There is a lullaby quality to this song, but Zukofsky's handling of lullabies in "The" is somewhat sinister, as we saw with the snatch from "On the hearth" and will encounter again in just a moment. The tone of this song contrasts sharply with the Shylock outburst, the sort of reversal we have come to expect in this poem, which begs to be read against it. One way to put the problem for the poet is the very distinction between us and them manifest in Shylock's speech, which of course reflects that of the dominant culture but then becomes internalized. The mother, given her subject position within American society—as female, as Jew, as non-English speaker, as poorly educated working class—cannot but replicate this dichotomy. The poet must find an alternative, which in fact has already been forced upon him if by nothing other than his education, but which from the perspective of the mother is nothing other than assimilation. But what looks like assimilation from the mother's point of view is for the poet the embrace of the hybrid diversity opened up by modernism and fed by a milieu that was among the most culturally and linguistically diverse on the planet.³⁴

The concluding sixth movement makes the final break with the mother and goes with the Sun. It is full of peculiarities. The first 15 lines include two lullabies, images or songs of maternal protection and comfort. The first is the very famous Yiddish lullaby, "Raisins and Almonds," originally from Abraham Goldfaden's operetta *Shulamith* (1880), and the latter is from the end of Ibsen's dramatic poem *Peer Gynt* (1867). Both lullabies are compromised, primarily by additional references to the larger works from which they are extracted. Zukofsky's reworking of "Raisins and Almonds" is turned around and addressed to the mother, with the thumping reiteration of "mother" added at the end of most lines giving it a somewhat ominous feel. Such repetitions are quite common in "The" and they normally signal irony, at the very least, although in this instance it is possible to hear tenderness as well. The poet exchanges the mother's soothing gift of raisins and almonds for wisdom and learning, which he says may save him from Tophet. In the original lullaby, the mother prophesizes that her baby will become a rich tradesman—a fancy created in the cradle—and Zukofsky touches on this aspect by introducing "bartering." In this context wisdom and learning are an alternative choice that will or already has taken him away from the food offered by the mother, that is, her hopes and expectations. The original intent of the lullaby as a lullaby has effectively been turned inside out, and the insistent, even insipid repetition of

³⁴ A few biographical factors, admittedly necessarily mixed with speculation, may be in order here. Zukofsky's parents were Lithuanian Yiddish speaking immigrants, and Zukofsky was their only child born in the U.S. The next youngest was his brother, Morris Ephraim, who was twelve years older and the only family member who could comfortably speak English and was interested in books. It is not surprising that Zukofsky's entrance into school, where he was precociously successful, was a decisive event in his development. He was the beneficiary of the reformed and greatly expanded public school system at the turn of the century, which to a significant extent was specifically designed to assimilate the waves of immigrants of the latter part of the 19th and early 20th centuries with a practical as opposed to classical orientation (Zukofsky attended Stuyvesant High School, the top math and science school in the city). From this perspective Zukofsky was a model success, and one can hardly doubt that his schooling, which required the adoption of English, was decisive in his early rejection of his parents' religion, his self-identification as an English speaker and poet, and his determination not to end up in the kind of jobs in which his father and siblings labored. On the other hand, given the multi-cultural, multi-lingual environment in which Zukofsky grew up, precisely what assimilation would mean is not necessarily straight forward.

“lullaby” in line 275 sounds like an exorcism.³⁵ Then the poet refers to a key moment in Goldfaden’s story when Absalom swears to marry Shulamith, calling on as his witnesses a cat and a well, the only meaningful objects in sight at the moment, but of course Absalom will promptly break his promise and marry someone else. All this seems a bit portentous for the poet’s relationship both with his mother and her manifestation as the expectations of Jewishness. The Ibsen allusion is more succinct but along similar lines. The lullaby that concludes Ibsen’s play is sung to Peer as he confronts his own death by Solveig, who is something of an eternal maternal spirit, declaring her unwavering faith in Peer (line 281) despite his numerous misdemeanors, which include abandoning her years previous. Although not literally his mother, Peer calls her “mother and wife.” Zukofsky then quotes some snippets from earlier in the play when Peer’s actual mother dies, at the moment indicated in the stage direction (line 284), and shortly after speaks line 285, here projected into the mouth of the poet, that he must now go off and wander the world. And the poet proceeds to do just that, going hunting into the woods under the moon, although it turns out his hunt is actually cruising for a girl, in fact, a gentile girl. I have rather comically flattened out the text into this banal little narrative, whereas of course the telling is a good deal bumpier, more complex and funnier. Nonetheless, the trajectory should be clear enough and has been long anticipated by the rest of the poem. Although he assures the mother that he will not forget her (line 286), he clearly needs to leave home—he has to grow up and find his girl—but this includes leaving behind the claims of Jewishness. However, this girl, Helen Gentile in one of her several manifestations, is not interested in this Jewish boy—her rejection rendered in an overtly awkward pidgin, perhaps reflecting the poet’s shyness or perhaps his buffoonishness. It is not at all clear how we are to read the significance of this episode within the poet’s narrative, although it comically indicates that it is not so simple to leave behind the claims of Jewishness, if that is what he intended. We might take this as indicating that assimilation, literarily speaking, is not so easy after all. But the whole thing is cast within the trite genre of adolescent eroticism and hyperbolic beauty worship, so that it seems to me the sort of self-mockery a poem such as this necessarily throws up. In what is apparently another apparition of “Helen,” there appears Baedekera Schönberg, perhaps a perpetually moving or touring ideal of Western beauty who evidently leaves a few casualties in her wake. Just as the poet is trying to make his break and be serious, the multiple ironies the poem has so assiduously compounded come mocking.

The next stanza seems to start entirely anew, as if the preceding had been something of a false start, with the line: “Our God immortal such Life as is our God” (line 309). The notes indicate this line refers to “myself,” which at this point seems a suitably bombastic identification. Actually this line has a double reference as it also is attributed to Bach, and in fact appears to be a rendering presumably from one of his cantatas—so perhaps “myself” means this line is the poet’s version of Bach. Bach brings us to serious music, and he is quickly backed up by Beethoven, Mozart and Rimsky-Korsakov, and in the process the hint that the poet might be God is appropriately modified to being a firefly or a “little errant star” (line 311)—errant indeed. We have grand music, magic and an “open sesame” as a suitable drum roll leading into the concluding passage of the poem. But first come a couple of lines from David’s lament for his rebellious son Absalom adapted by Zukofsky so that “son” and “sun” alternate madly. In the context of the poem this is a witty expression of the central conflict because one can imagine these lines as being spoken simultaneously or intermixed

³⁵ According to Schimmel, this repetitive “lullaby” line translates the refrain of Goldfaden’s song, “Ai-li lu-li lu-li lu,” which are actually traditional nonsense syllables that the mother in the song sings to her child (244). However, it should be obvious to the ear that Zukofsky’s rather too literal rendering makes for a leaden line, which is surely deliberate.

together by both mother and son. On the one hand the mother (in the voice of David) desperately calls back or is already lamenting the loss of her son, while on the other the poet reaches out for the sun but has not yet quite shed the ties of being a son.

Then assuring the mother that he has not forgotten her, he again evokes Heine only to distance himself from him in that his song does not arise out of great suffering, presumably relating to Heine's Jewishness, but from joy. One might feel the poet protests too much and that clearly there has been and is tension, but nonetheless his assertion is clear. He now concludes the poem with a final rendition from Yehoash, a hymn to the sun, and as such another attempt following the hymn to the Lord/sun in the fifth movement that fizzled out with the intrusion of Chance. The Sun is now out in full force (and capitalized) and the pun with son has been left behind. As already mentioned, Zukofsky apparently altered Yehoash's "I" to "we," which suits the poet's expansive desire to realize himself beyond an individual voice or specific cultural identity. Arms out wide and reiterations of "myriad" complement this inclusive sense, to which is added an allusion to the Russian Revolution and its internationalist ideology in addressing the Sun as "our Comrade" (line 323)—Zukofsky notes the "Bolsheviki" in case we miss the hint. This internationalist ideology will remain a basic assumption throughout Zukofsky's life and have far-ranging consequences in his writing. However, if my previous readings of the Yehoash passages, as well as the other inner passages in the second and fifth movements, are plausible, then there are problems with this concluding declaration too. This song's promise is mere assertion; its overt allegory and its hortatory rhetoric tend to draw attention to its own lack of assurance, particularly given the buildup. I am not sure this is what Zukofsky intended, and it would appear he is attempting to draw on traditions of rousing political hymns, but to my ear at least it is probably the weakest part of the poem, unless we take it as at least partially self-mocking.³⁶ It is certainly not a style he will much resort to in the future—although it does reappear in the poem placed immediately following "The" in *55 Poems*, the Lenin poem written a year earlier. I suggested that the "The" of Zukofsky's title points, in one sense, to a specific individual poet, who has become at the end of the poem "a" poet among myriads, now ready to move onto "A", which Zukofsky told Pound was intended to make good on that conclusion (*EP/LZ* 79).³⁷ "A" is about the poet among others, although it starts with a poet recognizably similar to that of "The" in the sense that he is still feeling singular and seeking an "exit." Much of the early movements of "A" return to the concerns of "The," but now shed of the heavily satiric and ironic manner.

It is remarkable how often "Poem beginning "The" is read in isolation, as if one could safely use it as a basis for generalizing about Zukofsky, especially with respect to the question of his Jewishness. Just two years later he composed "A"-4 (1928), which one would

³⁶ According to Schimmel, Zukofsky actually tones down the "messianic fervor" of the original Yiddish of this poem. "Wrack" in line 318 is from the title (*Oif di Churvos*) and would usually be translated "ruins" (Schimmel 244), but Zukofsky's version refers us back to the "wrecks" in the opening lines of "The" and the critique of *The Waste Land's* negativity. In an unpublished letter to René Taupin, Zukofsky states that his voice in "The" is not that of Jeremiah but prophesies a "new order" that is as infinite as the final syllable of his name: SKY (dated 14 April 1931).

³⁷ Zukofsky also tells Pound in the same letter and repeated this point many years later (*SL* 272) that the seed of "A" was the line rendered from Bach included toward the end of "The" (line 309) discussed above, which is actually taken from another poem by Zukofsky, "For a Thing by Bach," written in 1925 and published later in *Pagany* (Oct.-Dec. 1930), although never collected. See the commentary on "A"-22 & -23 for some of Zukofsky's later reflections on the distinction between "the" and "a."

think was something of a programmatic statement, since Zukofsky so deliberately included it in “A”, after which this topic all but disappears until after World War II.³⁸ Essentially “A”-4 (and continuing into the beginning of “A”-5) reiterates the position where the poet ends up in “The,” acknowledging his Jewishness as one of the inexorable elements of his makeup but firmly refusing to take on a specifically Jewish identity in his poetry. There are touches of satire in “A”-4, but it is markedly cooler, more trenchantly ironic than the often flip manner of “The,” and its target is unambiguously traditional Judaism. The emphasis on “fathers,” but not a specific father, to represent this orthodox Judaism may be intended to counterbalance the emphasis on the mother in “The,” but in both cases the poet must firmly keep them at a distance. Again renditions from Yehoash appear prominently in “A”-4, after which the Yiddish poet will never reappear in Zukofsky’s work, and also Zukofsky has studiously avoided any references or images that could be interpreted as specifically Jewish in his translations. On the other hand, Yehoash is clearly a spokesman for Yiddish “jargon” as opposed to the pious demands of traditional Hebrew. Yiddish as a low mongrel speech as opposed to a sacred text functions as a vehicle that allows the poet to dilute and then break from orthodox Judaism. It is not happenstance that the first poem rendered from Yehoash is a Japanese imitation. However, in my understanding, while Yehoash was clearly important in the poet’s development, it is not finally a matter of identifying with Yiddish as against the fathers. The poet is represented by “A”-4’s opening lyric—rigorously modernist, urban and secular—which contrasts sharply with Yehoash’s predominately romantic nature imagery and sentiments, at least as represented by the poems Zukofsky translates both here and in “The.” This quintessential “Objectivist” lyric is an elaborate reflecting ball mirroring multiple light sources, and therefore an appropriate emblem of how Zukofsky wished to conceive of his poetic identity (see commentary on “A”-4).

IV

The above reading of “The,” like virtually all other discussions of the poem, assumes it presents an autobiographical argument—an assumption at least partially supported by Zukofsky’s own remarks.³⁹ This in turn entails a working assumption that the numerous outside sources—clearly marked as quotations, allusions, parodies and the like—more or less ventriloquize the voice of the poet, who is explicitly identified as “Zukofsky” in the second movement. Concentrating on the autobiographical argument, however, tends to flatten out these other voices, which in actuality make for a quite choppy and self-conflicting text. As I argued, the conclusion of the poem is already implied in its very possibility since the “myriad” the poet would embrace is everywhere manifest in the modernist inclusiveness and form of the poem itself. In this sense the poem might be taken as an explanation as well as demonstration of why he must write this way. I have suggested that the “epic” appears in “The” in relation to the personal, so that the personal is maintained while being objectively or socially contextualized, or we might see this as an undecidable alteration between the personal and its objectification. This of course creates infinite complexities, which is most

³⁸ “A”-8 includes a couple of quotations on Jews in early American history (70-71) and *Thanks to the Dictionary* prominently uses various materials from the life of David, but the autobiographical connection is missing. When Zukofsky began on the autobiographical based novel, *Little*, in 1950 he goes out of his way in the first couple of pages to indicate that the familial context is nominally Christian.

³⁹ The only significant exception that I know of is Ming-Qian Ma, “A ‘no man’s land!’: Postmodern Citationality in Zukofsky’s ‘Poem beginning “The,”” *Upper Limit Music: The Writing of Louis Zukofsky*, ed. Mark Scroggins (University of Alabama Press, 1997): 129-153, who examines the status of quotations in “The.”

obviously manifest in the irresolvable ironies of the poem—we can never pin down when the poet is really speaking in his “own” voice, just as we are often unsure exactly who he is directing his irony towards. The satire is quite unnerving because the targets are not reduced to clear-cut types or generalizations, as one would expect for example in Pope, and the ironies constantly threaten to turn back on the poet. One could plausibly reread the poem as offering no coherent arguments or autobiographical narrative, but rather as an indeterminable echo chamber. Without pushing the point so far, I have attempted to highlight some of the moments when the relation between assertion and form (enunciated and enunciation) becomes problematic.

If we read “The” less as an autobiographical argument and more as a textual pastiche of shifting ironies, we might see the poem as anticipating Zukofsky’s later work without the irony and satire. But then, without the irony and satire “The” is something altogether different, and as I indicated these techniques almost entirely disappear from Zukofsky’s subsequent work. Both Pound and Williams immediately recognized in Zukofsky a potentially useful polemicist to carry the flag for a more innovative tendency within modernist American poetry at a time when modernism was threatened with respectability and a conservative pull-back—as in fact eventuated. Ivor Winters wrote a comically threatening letter to Williams describing Zukofsky as his (Williams’) pit-bull, which irritated Zukofsky enough to respond angrily (*SL* 82). Zukofsky probably had some reason to be sensitive, and clearly he did not want to be pegged in this role. In fact by the mid-1930s he had largely given up critical prose, except very intermittently (over two-thirds of the original edition of *Prepositions*, a modest size collection, was written by 1936). Fundamentally, Zukofsky did not believe argument was in the interest of poetry, and in a sense the trajectory his poetry took sought increasingly radical ways to embody and perform sense rather than to say, argue or narrate. In the midst of the politically saturated 1930s, Zukofsky would insist in writing on Lewis Carroll and Charlie Chaplin that whatever their personal views they were of no account in their work (*Prep*+ 57, 65). Zukofsky quickly realized that the argumentative, satiric manner of “The” was not what he wanted to do, or perhaps more to the point, could not effectively realize the positive alternative implied by the poem’s argument. Obviously there are numerous local exceptions, and it is difficult to imagine how a politically-minded poet of the 1930s could avoid critique and satire altogether, but my point is that it very rarely frames the overall perspective or attitude of his work. “Irony” is of course a tricky term, and if what is meant is not its deployment for satiric or sarcastic purposes but as a fundamental textual indecidability, then one could say Zukofsky’s work is thoroughly ironic. However, the abandonment of satire or irony as critique has far-ranging implications, which I will propose without pretending to adequately argue.

If we skip the complications of the 1930s to take Zukofsky’s post-war work as his typical achievement, we note first of all the lack of a sense of crisis, by which I mean he does not leverage the role of the poet on directly addressing, suffering or prophesying a way out of contemporary history. Secondly, his work lacks cultural critique, the condemnation of a vulgar or inauthentic culture against which the poet presents himself as castigator or representative of an authentic alternative. The lack of these frameworks, so ubiquitous throughout the poetry and art of the 20th century, is, I would suggest, a major reason why so many readers find Zukofsky difficult, because they are so habituated to using them to construct dramatic situations or narratives no matter how abstract the work. However problematic Zukofsky’s insistent use of musical analogies for his poetics, one can understand this as expressing his aspiration for a poetry as object, as asserting its existence among other objects without framing those objects—infinately related to but not claiming any purchase over them. The point of what might seem a hopelessly extreme nominalistic position is the realization of the desire for a sense of proportion or harmony among things or in the world,

and from this perspective one can understand the powerful attraction of the Spinozian model, whether or not it was a decisive influence on him as early as the composition of “The.” Once one posits this aspiration, however, the social, political, philosophical meanings of the poetry come rushing back in, since, as pointed out earlier, the desire for a sense of proportion when inhibited invents, so to speak, the political. Proportion (Spinozian reality, action, power, perfection, etc.) is always necessarily dynamic and a process of negotiation, never in some absolute or abstract sense fully achieved. Argument, satire, irony as critique necessarily assume—implicitly or explicitly—a point of purchase, of judgment, of authenticity from which satiric critique gains its authority, or in its more extreme forms becomes a mere automatic mechanism of contrariness and inversion. If anything, the increasing tenor of the 1930s as well as his observation of what was happening to Pound during this period confirmed Zukofsky’s sense that this was not what he wanted to be drawn into and would be detrimental to poetry as he conceived it. The usual narrative of Zukofsky’s career is that a decisive break happens with World War II, after which his earlier political concerns are abandoned or sublimated. There is a general truth to this, even though precisely how one articulates the implications of this change will remain open to considerable debate. However, I am suggesting that these later developments are a logical extension of his poetic assumptions from very early on. Something of the shift is already marked by the two major poems Zukofsky chose to bookend *55 Poems*—“Poem beginning ‘The’” and “‘Mantis’”—where the overall difference in manner and tone is striking. One can certainly find residual elements of the former in the latter, including the hortatory conclusion, but this only highlights how much more subdued and controlled “‘Mantis’” is, as well as the lack of irony or sarcasm directed toward the addressee. The tightly imbricated structure of “‘Mantis’” functions to set up complexes of counterbalancing impulses. Obviously “‘Mantis’” looks forward to and typifies much of Zukofsky’s subsequent work in a way “‘The’” does not.⁴⁰

10 June 2014

⁴⁰ “‘Mantis,’” like “‘The,’” has its own paratext in the form of the “Interpretation,” which Zukofsky definitely considered part of the poem. The “Interpretation” is of course argumentative, but also an interesting example of an argument that attempts to avoid or undo itself. Taken as a whole (with the “Interpretation”), “‘Mantis’” might be seen as a hybrid transitional piece—partially but not entirely getting argument out of his poetry’s system. The use of quotation marks in both titles of these major poems, as well as “A”, indicates their interpretive slipperiness.