

“meeting by chance or design”: The Forms of “A”

Jeffrey Twitchell-Waas

Even by the usual standards of modernist long poems the structure and coherence of “A” is elusive, and by and large readers have been content to consider it, at best, as a loose gathering of mostly long poems. Indeed, in the current state of affairs, most commentary on “A” simply selects passages here and there that suit a given thesis without bothering to consider individual movements in a comprehensive manner, much less over significant sequences of movements or the volume as a whole.¹ Of course modernist long poems have always posed steep practical problems for academic criticism, especially to the degree they resist narrative, including psychological development, as a structural principle. The most successful piece of modernist propaganda in English was T.S. Eliot’s review of *Ulysses* proposing the famous “mythical method.”² Eliot had the good sense never to include this piece in any of his collections of criticism, but then that was unnecessary as academics and journalists now had the key they needed to justify the cultural seriousness of disjointed works without having to take their disjointedness as much more than a symptom of a bad time. We can no longer take the mythic method as Eliot presented it very seriously, but its contemporary version is a relatively abstract, usually heavily theoretical framework into which are plugged a few exemplary passages, although one may have the feeling that one would end up with more or less the same argument no matter what specific texts were under consideration. The other academic option is to provide a systematically arbitrary annotation to a given poem’s references, allusions, sources and so on, leaving the question of coherence implicitly immanent. This latter option is available for “A” in the annotations on the Z-site, but while some readers might assume that solving Zukofsky’s complex of references and allusions will help resolve the question of its arguments and intent, this is a false hope.

The following notes attempt to address how “A” coheres, rather than being taken as a miscellany of 24 poems. At the same time, I hope to offer a sketch roadmap to “A”, which can appear such a bewildering hodge-podge to the neophyte or even not-so-neophyte reader. While it is true that Zukofsky seems to avoid any suggestion of a narrative, thematic development or mythic argument to structure “A”, it nonetheless seems reasonable to pose the question of why and in what sense he believed the 24 movements of the poem belonged together. The evidence suggests, as one might expect, that Zukofsky’s formal ideas evolved over the 45 plus years of “A”’s composition (1928-

¹ For the main attempts to read “A” as a sequence, see Barry Ahearn, *Zukofsky’s “A”: An Introduction* (1983); Bruce Comens, *Apocalypse and After: Modern Strategy and Postmodern Tactics in Pound, Williams and Zukofsky* (1995); Burton Hatlen, “Art and/as Labor: Some Dialectical Patterns in ‘A’-1 through ‘A’-10,” *Contemporary Literature* 25.2 (1984): 204-234 and “From Modernism to Postmodernism: Zukofsky’s ‘A’-12,” in Mark Scroggins, ed. *Upper Limit Music: The Writing of Louis Zukofsky* (1997): 214-229; Tim Woods, *The Poetics of the Limit: Ethics and Politics in Modern and Contemporary American Poetry* (2002). Both Comens and Hatlen account for “A”’s form as a progression from modernist to postmodernist assumptions.

² *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot*, ed. Frank Kermode (1975): 175-178.

1974). However, for a poet who is usually thought of as acutely self-reflective and intellectual, Zukofsky left virtually no public statements about the larger intent of “A”, and his considerable surviving workbooks and notes include surprisingly little meta-textual reflection and provide no more than occasional glimpses of his designs.³ There is little evidence that Zukofsky agonized over the structure of his poem, and he seems to have intuited from the outset that the poem would find its proper form. This is obviously a bit too neat, but the point is that Zukofsky does not seem to have felt to the same degree as his fellow modernists that it was incumbent on him to come up with an answer to the crisis of his times.

The first part of this commentary will consider the question of “A”’s general coherence from a number of different angles. This will be followed by a more specific examination of major blocks of the poem in chronological order and describe the specific formal characteristics of the poem over the course of its compositional evolution.

I

1) It is often pointed out that “A” is perhaps the only interminable modernist long poem to be completed, although such a statement begs the question of what is meant by “completed.” The *Cantos* are unfinished because Pound clearly proposed his intention to bring them to conclusion, but the title and contents of the last published volume indicate he failed to make it “cohere.” Both the poem and Pound’s biography offer ample fodder for arguing why that happened. *Paterson* is complete. Proposed as a four book poem, Williams finished it as such, and the fact that he subsequently added a fifth book only indicates that in the modern era any reflection back on a completed work will reveal its incompleteness. After all even Milton was persuaded that *Paradise Lost* needed an augmentation that most of us could probably do without. *Paterson* is complete as a four book poem and then as a five book poem, providing the opportunity for debate as to whether the fifth book really belongs with the others or not. Given the thematic and formal centrality of dissolution or dispersal in *Paterson*, any definitive sense of completeness would contradict the underlying premise of the poem. In the case of Olson’s *Maximus Poems* the sequence never proposes a conclusion since its basis is an autobiographical exploration in which its meaningfulness is in the act of historical and personal investigation, and therefore it is impossible to imagine a conclusion other than the simple loss of energy or death. Other poems, then, such as Duncan’s serial works, explicitly reject any possibilities of conclusion from the outset. In recent decades there have been any number of long long-term poems, but it would never occur to us to worry about their conclusions, although we might over their principles of coherence.

Zukofsky finished “A” by simply proposing from the outset that there would be 24 parts and having enough persistence and longevity to complete the job. Ron Silliman has argued that “A” “solved” the problem of completing the mega-poem by realizing the individual parts could be written as distinct wholes, without obvious formal or thematic

³ The most extensive comments Zukofsky made on his plans for “A” are in a couple early letters to Pound (*EP/LZ* 77-82, 110-113). For other partial explanations in the form of notes or correspondence, see Barry Ahearn, *Zukofsky’s “A”: An Introduction* (1983): 38, 75-78, 231-241.

continuities, but capable of various relations with other parts.⁴ Silliman's argument strikes me as essentially correct, although he does not go beyond the sketchiest proposal to demonstrate how the conception of "A" as a single work or "group" is anything more than giving the parts sequential numbers and publishing them under one cover. Silliman's perspective is only possible retrospectively, and it is perhaps all too easy to make at a time when any narrative or sequential logic has been pretty roughed up and in some quarters thoroughly delegitimized. Such an "open" concept of the long poem was not available to Zukofsky when he began. It is worth keeping in mind that in 1928, when "A" was launched, the sub-genre of the modernist long poem barely existed, whereas by the time he finished in 1974, it was well established. The question of "A"'s coherence was necessarily an urgent issue when Zukofsky began the poem and remained a concern throughout. Yet, given the general environment within which he wrote, particularly during the composition of the first half, "A" is notable for the degree to which it seemed to allow for orders between the parts to happen rather than to be predetermined.

2) There are at least two obvious ways to read "A" as a whole. First, sequentially and chronologically, and second, a more spatial conception wherein any individual movement might be taken as a starting point to which any or all the others can be related—I presume the latter is what Silliman has in mind is referring to "A" as a "group" as distinguished from a sequence. The first is authenticated by convention, by the numbered sequencing, by Zukofsky's dating of the movements in the table of contents and his later description of "A" as "a poem of a life." However, the second arrangement proposes itself as the negation of these reasons given for the first: the sequence of numbering and book presentation is purely convention and offers only the most minimal imaginable motivation for a linear order of reading. Although the presence of the poet and details from his life are often in evidence, there is no explicit development of a persona or of a historical perspective on his times. In other words, it is far from clear that there is any master theme(s) or argument underlying the poem as a development. If, as Zukofsky sometimes seemed to suggest, the poem intends to record its times as experienced by a particular poet, then what we end up is precisely the seeming randomness of history without an explanatory framework. The familiar modernist heterogeneity of materials is complicated by the seemingly arbitrary heterogeneity of formal presentation, within given movements as well as between them. The general failure to account for this formal heterogeneity is a measure of the general inability to read Zukofsky's work and "A" in particular.

3) Titles serve as indices of coherence and "A"'s is suggestive. At least in later years when asked, Zukofsky routinely insisted the title simply quoted the first word of the poem, hence its quotation marks (*SL* 272). This is undeniably true but also deliberately disingenuous. Even more than the number 24, the letter A is evocative of all manner of cultural significations, and the fact that it would stand on the cover or title page along with the prominent Z of his surname was one of those happy accidents Zukofsky so regularly incorporated into his writing. It is thus not surprising, and was perhaps vaguely planned in his mind all along, that the poem end with an alphabetically arranged pastiche.

⁴ "Z-Sited Path" in *The New Sentence* (Roof, 1989): 128.

(I say “ends” in the sense that “A”-23 is the last composed movement and clearly written as if it is the concluding part of the poem, yet that of course was superseded by Celia’s assemblage of what he then designated to be “A”-24.) In any case, the emphasis on the literal material of the poem, its letters, whose self-reflexiveness is designated by the quotation marks, would prove to be an apt projection of what the poem became, even though when he began and named the poem, this was not nearly so obvious. “A” of course also follows from the poem with which he publically announced himself, “Poem beginning ‘The,’” which in turn can be related to his well-known claim, in the context of refuting the need for mythopoetic structures, that there is enough “epos” in the words “the” and “a” to keep one busy (*Prep.* 10). There is an element in all this that Zukofsky simply did not like thinking up titles (*SL* 232), and in a high proportion of his work he resorts to the most practical option: numbering, repeating the first word or words, and so on. One can understand this as a suspicion of the convention of titles serving as the poor man’s key to how to read or what to expect from the poem. In the event, “A”’s title would prove highly appropriate in its letterist minimalism, its suggestiveness that explains nothing, and its functionality for a poem that the poet knew would only take on its identity in process and could not be foreseen at the outset.

4) The choice of 24 as the number of parts for “A” is of course not entirely arbitrary, and suggests the natural sequence or cycle of the day or the traditional 24 book division of the Homeric epics—an interesting play of nature and textual convention. But as organizational patterns, neither of these seems relevant to “A” beyond the implication that the number 24 has become one of many numbers suggesting a complete set or cycle and is at the same time arbitrary. Given the title of the poem, one might think a 26 unit work would have made better sense (Silliman will take up this possibility with *The Alphabet*, whose general form is clearly indebted to the example of “A”). By simply numbering the movements, which are otherwise untitled (with a characteristic couple of exceptions), Zukofsky evokes the two fundamental semiotic systems of Western expression and knowledge—letters and numbers.⁵ Whatever cultural significations one might find in the number 24, these seem of little importance compared with the simple practical fact that it is a reasonably large but not too large number, and once decided on becomes a rudimentary goalpost that the poet can then accumulatively fill out. At the time this was a remarkably simple and advanced solution to the structure of the long poem that apparently recognized there was no need for a predetermined structure beyond the accumulative relations and recurrences that would invariably occur in the process of its composition and also allowed flexibility in responding to the unpredictable events of the day. It is also a solution that rejects the mythopoetic underpinnings that most modernists found irresistible.

⁵ Rachel Blau DuPlessis has suggested two further cultural models for the 24 parts: the 24 parts of Bach’s *Well-Tempered Clavier* (DuPlessis credits Bob Perelman for this) and the 24 books of the Hebrew Bible, counting the minor prophets as one book (DuPlessis, *Purple Passages: Pound, Eliot, Zukofsky, Olson, Creeley and the Ends of Patriarchal Poetry* (2012): 79). I am unaware of any evidence, internal or external, to support either of these suggestions, and it is unclear how such references help in reading the poem.

Another factor that seriously blurs any sense of order that the 24-part division might project is the radical variation in scale of the individual movements. Judging from the first seven movements, Zukofsky began with something of a Canto-like conception of the individual movements: flexible but all representing a manageable length both as composition and reading units. This is in line with the subdivisions of all other long modernist poems. If Zukofsky had continued on the basis set by this initial group, “A” would have been finished well before the end of the 1930s and come in at about 150 pages. “A”-8 would mark a complete reorientation or simple abandonment of any sense of scale so that subsequent movements would range from 135 pages (“A”-12) to four words (“A”-16), none of which are subdivided (with, typically, an exception in the five-part partita presentation of “A”-13). This anomalousness in mere quantity will be matched by anomalousness in form, all of which throws any potential significance of the choice of 24 parts into further disarray. Yet, as everyone knows, numbers are constantly evoked in “A”, teasing the reader with the promise of underlying structures, so that there is a persistent implication of structural analogies between poetry, music and science. But with Zukofsky none of these guarantee order except as we necessarily sense and make orders in our ordinary negotiation in living. Numbers are nothing more or less than a language through or with which cultural acts are articulated.

5) As far as we know, Zukofsky decided on 24 movements at the outset, but he did not necessarily begin by conceiving of them as largely autonomous and the internal indications are that he did not initially have a clear sense of what the structure of the poem would be. Like the *Cantos*, “A” seems to have begun with the assumption that its form would find itself in process, but such an organic approach stands in tension with more purely constructivist tendencies. As already mentioned, a trace of the organic structural model will remain, at least in Zukofsky’s mind, although this becomes a matter of varying structures over a chronological stretch of history, rather than any overt development of sections out of each other. This was not the case, however, with the earliest movements in which Zukofsky still clearly felt the need for linking tags between the sections, most obviously in the form of brief bits from Bach’s *St. Matthew Passion* libretto which are italicized. These recycled bits, which are sometimes quite microscopic, would continue into “A”-8, but thereafter disappear, and when later Zukofsky made some revisions to the first eight movements (“A” 1-6 in 1942 and “A”-8 in 1957), a fair number of these tags or repetitions were deleted, as if he no longer felt they were necessary or helpful.

6) Later in life, Zukofsky liked to suggest that the larger coherence of “A”, and of all his works taken together, was simply the sense of tracking his life. This is the “poem of a life” argument, which Zukofsky used as a subtitle for a couple American editions of “A”.⁶ This suggests that the poem as a total sequence can be read as a species of autobiography, or more exactly as a biography of sorts in which the life-long experiences of the poet are formally translated into the formal structures and concerns of the

⁶ The Doubleday reprint of “A” 1-12 (1967) and the American edition of “A” 13-21 (1969). Apparently this subtitle was not used for the English editions of the same volumes published by Jonathan Cape.

movements, which can just as easily be understood as a type of chronicle of the poet's times as he attempted to immanently express his sense of the socio-historic stages through which he lived.⁷ Zukofsky was fortunate in living an exemplarily dull life, as far as outward biographical events go, so there is little temptation to read "A" biographically in any ordinary sense, as is virtually irresistible with many of his contemporaries. More than is the case with either the *Cantos* or *Paterson*, Zukofsky allowed himself to appear undisguised in his poem and to many the later movements are all too preoccupied with his family life. However, there is no dramatization of the family, beyond the fact that the son grows up, and ultimately the family functions as intimate presences rather than as particularized characters. This is to say, for all the personal detail that enters the poem there is nothing approximating a biographical framework or interest that can guide its reading.

Nevertheless, Zukofsky did authorize a chronological and historical reading of "A" as a sequence in that he carefully dated each of the movements in the table of contents. These dates confirm that the sequence is largely arranged chronologically, with just enough irregularities to keep things interesting since the explanations for these exceptions are largely biographical rather than structural. It is worth noting that this dating of the individual movements was not something added to the final complete version of "A" but began with the earliest book publication of "A", the Origin Press edition of "A" 1-12 (1959). At that time the last completed movement had already been composed eight years previous and of course the rest stretched back three decades, so Zukofsky seemed concerned to indicate clearly that this was early work and that the individual movements significantly reflected the quite traumatic historical times over which they had been written. As everyone knows, particularly the movements of the 1930s reflect a strong alignment with Marxism, which could no longer be received in the same sense as when it was written and would be objectionable to many potential readers, so a distancing historicizing was perhaps prudent as well as desirable.⁸ But while the

⁷ See Zukofsky's brief foreword to the later editions of "A" 1-12, which includes a quotation from his short sketch, "It Was," that suggests he is attempting to "sound" his times (*Prep.* 228).

⁸ When "A" 1-12 was being prepared for publication, Zukofsky wrote Williams, who had composed a short essay to be included in that volume, suggesting that he consider whether this might provoke some politically motivated criticism given the clearly Marxist sections of the poem. The background to this was the traumatic episode of Williams' appointment as Consultant to the Library of Congress in 1952-1953, when Williams was the victim of McCarthyite attacks that contributed to an episode of severe depression. In the end Zukofsky apparently did not send this letter, perhaps fearing the very raising of the topic might revive bad memories at a time when Williams was in very poor health. After Zukofsky's death Robert Duncan published an article that was certainly sympathetic, but flatly considered Zukofsky as Stalinist during the 1930s when the young Duncan first came across his work. Although this offended some, in the context of the 1930s Duncan's designation cannot simply be brushed off, as Zukofsky's public allegiances as evident particularly in "A"-8 meant he could not but be identified as a fellow traveller of the Communist Party. See Duncan, "As Testimony: Reading Zukofsky

poem consistently reminds us of contemporary history—sometimes addressing it quite directly (as in “A”-8, -10 or -15), while at other times it appears more like the TV news intermittently breaking through daily preoccupations—the poem cannot be read as an ongoing comment or response to events. There is an important sense in which Zukofsky attempts to immanently and phenomenologically record his times, but this is precisely the intersection of the subjective and objective that he assumes to be the case anyway and that is necessarily manifest in any verbal construct. It is not so much that the subjective agent gives continuity to the disparate materials of the poem, but that the formal presentation of the poem implies an allegory or any number of allegories of its authorship.

7) The most obvious recurring name, topic or theme in “A” is J. S. Bach, who is named in the first lines and on the last composed page, and at times Zukofsky states that the poem’s “theme” is Bach (*Prep.* 228; *SL* 270-272). If formally Bach suggests the fugal form and thematically the topic of transfiguration (*St. Matthew Passion*), then this is a perfectly plausible way to read “A” and probably a good many other modernist works as well. Specific Bach’s works suggested something of a formal template for several movements, but these are more impressionistically analogous than formally rigorous attempts to adapt musical structures. The fugal form, which Zukofsky indicates at the end of “A”-6 he aspires to adapt for poetry, comes down to the familiar modernist presentation that rejects narrative or other sequentially organized patterns for long works. Pound was already offering such a model in the presentation of polyphonic materials and the use of counterpointing. Zukofsky did not experiment very extensively with serial type recurrence of phrases, whereas themes invariably become elastic and hardly function with the kind of rigor one associates with a musical fugue. On the other hand the conception of a musical texture in the sense of building an associative structure not so much based on an argument but on a constant process of thickening, development and counterpoint, will become an important formal rule of thumb for “A” (see Z-Notes commentary on “A”-12 for more on fugal form).

The facts of Bach’s life are scattered throughout many of the movements, and beginning with “A”-14 (1964) he programmatically included substantial segments worked from his biography into three successive long movements. These present a portrait of a hard-working professional musician encountering the usual practical obstacles and complications in realizing his creative work, which is never presented as personal expression or struggle. Bach is a non-heroic artist, unless one recognizes the heroic as prolific production combined with an insistence on exacting standards in the face of the ordinary demands and limitations of life.

Bach appears, then, in various guises in “A”, which do not add up to a single argument or point, except as a reminder of the importance for Zukofsky of the concept of music, that is, of poetry’s complex relationship with music. All the modernist poets Zukofsky was most closely associated with—Pound, Williams, Bunting—were fans of Baroque music as a direct reaction against the affective music of the 19th century, and this ideal of a intricate, inventive, clearly noted rather than expressive music represented an

These Forty Years,” *Collected Essays and Other Prose* (2014): 339-345; Burton Hatlen, “Stalin and/or Zukofsky: A Note,” *Paideuma* 8 (1979): 149-151.

important model. Zukofsky went further than most in pursuit of a non-intentional poetry in its emphasis on sensuous form and surface intricacy over argument or paraphrasable theme. At the same time, Zukofsky's conception of poetic music is clearly not that of sonority or singability but rather the tendency to feel out the immanent possibilities latent in textual materials. "A" opens with the poet experiencing a performance of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*, and it is perhaps this idea of musical experience that remains most important, that difficult to conceptualize sense of being always inside the affective complex of the work.

8) Various images and/or topics recur throughout or through large segments of "A", and as already suggested Zukofsky trusted that these would spontaneously appear in the compositional process and form a significant cohering principle without imposing an identifiable dominant. Two well-known instances, horses and the space race, are worth brief consideration. From the moment that Zukofsky sets sawhorses dancing in "A"-7, horses can pop up at any moment. As Mark Scroggins points out, often the horse, particularly in its manifestation as a plodding work horse, stands in for Zukofsky himself or his non-heroic image of poets generally.⁹ However, the diverse appearances of horses cannot be explained in such a straightforward metaphoric manner, and it is important to understand "horse" as a word-image objective or focal point, something that Zukofsky notes and uses wherever he happens to encounter it. In 1966 the Zukofskys spent a residency at the Yaddo artist retreat near Saratoga Springs, famous for its horse track, and while at the local bank Zukofsky, an inveterate smoker, picks up a matchbook with the image of a horse on it. This image with its motto appears among the details of "A"-18 (395) (the matchbook is preserved among Zukofsky's papers). There is a passage in "A"-13 worked from short snippets out of Shakespeare's *Two Noble Kinsmen* that all have to do with horses. In this case, Zukofsky seems to have consulted the index of *Bottom* under horse(s) and worked from the various quotations from the play he found referenced there (304-305). There is a similar passage in "A"-14 using the *Bottom* index to draw on a wider range of quoted works that mention horses (351-352). A variation on this procedure occurs in "A"-23 in a passage worked from quotations from the *Mabinogion*, for part of which Zukofsky took a number of different quotations that mention horses (sometimes tangentially, such as daggers with hilts made from the "bone of the sea-horse") and worked them together to produce a couple of lines in which some of the specific horse references have disappeared in the compositional process (555.35-37). In such cases, "horses" function as an index to draw otherwise unrelated textual pieces together for reworking and intertwining, a quasi-procedural method. "A"'s horses, therefore, cannot be taken as a simple image with a more or less consistent meaning, but is often pressed back to its pure wordness where its relations with other words is potentially infinite and unpredictable, as Zukofsky allows their contingency to become part of the creative process.

The space race from its inception seems to have fascinated Zukofsky, as it did many others at a time when it loomed as a major area of competition within the context

⁹ Mark Scroggins, *The Poem of a Life* (2007): 197-198.

of the Cold War.¹⁰ There are references to it beginning in “A”-13 (1960) and continuing right up to the moon landing itself in “A”-22 (1970-1973), as well as other recurring instances of the moon, often in combination with “lunatic.” Again, one cannot reduce this to a consistent meaning or position, such as that the race to the moon is pointless. Sometimes Zukofsky is plausible saying something of this sort, but equally he is clearly captivated by the whole business as a cultural manifestation of human ingenuity and aspiration. The irresistible associations with the lunatic (the early Soviet moon program was called Lunik), however, also inevitably relate to poets, whether one judges what they do as hopelessly nutty or ultimately concerned with more spacey, dream-like, utopian preoccupations. Poets themselves are a venerable manifestation of cultural space flight. Or, the moon can lead to associations with those indiscernible forces that largely determine our destinies, as with tides or history, or the moon can suggest Celia, not only because of traditional female associations but because C suggests a crescent moon, as well as “sea” and “see.” All these possibilities and attitudes can be bundled together in any given appearance of the space race without any pretense that they should or can be parsed out into a neat sense. What does not appear, however, is the moon as poetic image or atmosphere—Zukofsky’s moon is physical fact or a signifier that redefines itself in the various textual contexts in which it finds itself.

These samples indicate how Zukofsky expects the coherences of “A” to arise immanently and his insistence that the poem is after all words. Zukofsky’s abiding principle is that all things relate. But words as relations are multi-dimensional nodes, so precisely how given words relate cannot be predicated and requires a flexible and agile reader. This is the case because Zukofsky wants to resist allowing specific themes or arguments to dominate the operation of the poem, but instead to create a complex environment, like music, that we inhabit with a sense of enhanced existence.

9) In sum, Zukofsky seems to have begun with two assumptions that he gradually learned to trust and give freer reign over time. On the one hand, there is what he in later years frequently referred to as “recurrence,” the simple principle of repetition and variation that characterizes any poetic agent—indeed is the mark of subjectivity or character. These include the poet’s interests and responses to his times, as well as his conscious attention to and incorporation of such recurring concerns as his reflective response to the poem in process. The dominate recurrences will develop but also shift over time, and his openness to these changes, both subjective and historical, mean new materials and interests are constantly allowed in. This might be considered the organic “A”. On the other hand, there is Zukofsky’s abiding formalist concerns, ultimately based on the recognition of the mediated nature of any symbolic act. Glancing over the general trajectory of his work and of “A” in particular, there is a consistent upping of the formal artifice, manifesting itself in self-imposed forms, diversity of technique, improvisation—all tending to undermine any possibility of transparent consumption. It is this side of Zukofsky that we think of as most distinctive about his work, but I would suggest that both assumptions operate in dialectical interplay so that they can fold back into each other. The more artifice the more

¹⁰ Several passages from “A”, as well as other poems, were included in *Inside Outer Space: New Poems of the Space Age*, ed. Robert Vas Dias (1970).

personal, but then the personal is shown to be thoroughly socialized, most fundamentally because of the performative aspect of any symbolic act that assumes we exist with others.

Readers sympathetic to Zukofsky's work to begin with are unlikely to be unduly exercised by the lack of "A"'s overall coherence, but this could hardly be taken so cavalierly when Zukofsky began. What remains puzzling is how a 24-year-old poet in 1928 had the self-confidence or perhaps naiveté to launch a large-scale poem without any ruling idea or underlying structure other than the belief that the poem would find its order. We might speculate that Zukofsky's critical consideration of *The Waste Land*, the early *Cantos* and, possibly above all, *Ulysses* intuitively recognized that this was already the case, that the pretenses to mythopoetic underpinnings or suggestions of narrative continuity contained by the fiction of a singular consciousness were precisely that: merely flimsy scaffoldings for getting the job done but hardly convincing justifications for the works per se. This had already been pointed out by Pound, but his response was to attempt to establish a more solid and authentic foundation in both history and myth. From the outset Zukofsky rejected both the mythopoetic and the psychological that most other modernists found irresistible. This is one reason why Zukofsky is difficult to place within the larger narrative of modern American poetry, which in turn partially explains why he remains difficult to read since the usual set of frames for reading an experimental modernist poet—usually articulated as historical, psychological or existential—do not quite seem to fit.

II

The following attempts to describe the main formal characteristics of the individual movements of "A" and to trace continuities and changes over the course of its compositional chronology.

"A" 1-7 (1928-1930)

The first seven movements were printed complete in *An "Objectivists" Anthology* (1932), and Zukofsky clearly thought of them as a unit intended to lay down the foundation for the poem. It has often been assumed, reasonably enough, that these early movements hold clues to the intent of the whole—plus they have the added advantage of being more accessible than what comes later. From the viewpoint of the complete "A", however, these represent neither the poem's strongest claims for attention nor a reliable entrance into it. The first six movements of "A" have struck many readers as formally similar to the *Cantos*, although Zukofsky always insisted that, at least in 1928 when the first four were composed, he had yet to read the early sections of Pound's poem.¹¹ It is equally likely they show the influence of modernist novelists—Joyce and Woolf are both alluded to in "Poem beginning 'The'"—as they can be read as loosely stream-of-consciousness: responding to a performance of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*, the poet searches for the materials and an adequate form for his poem culminating in the question at the end of "A"-6 as to whether the fugal design can be adapted to poetry, with "A"-7 presumably an affirmative answer or initial attempt. The performance of *St. Matthew*

¹¹ Strictly speaking, Zukofsky says he had only seen the so-called Ur-Cantos when he began the first movements of "A" in 1928 (*EP/LZ* 78; *SL* 260).

Passion with which “A”-1 opens, or rather the poet’s experience of it, represents something of an ideal aesthetic realization, which critiques aspects of the social reality the poet stumbles back into after the performance, but which also gradually fades as the mundane reasserts itself. Within this loose portrait of the artist as a young man framework, the other early movements elaborate and simultaneously add new facets.

When the first seven movements were published together in *An “Objectivists” Anthology*, Zukofsky grouped the movements into pairs (with “A”-7 on its own) and gave each grouping a title snipped from the text.¹² This suggests a way to think about the ordering of these early movements, and clearly the pair “A”-3 (the Ricky elegy) and “A”-4 (the Jewish-Yehoash movement) are stylistically distinct from those that precede and follow, which is also a manifestation of their more focused themes. We then notice that “A”-2 and “A”-5 are linked by a named sparring partner, Kay, with whom the poet discusses questions of aesthetic form and its relation to society, and indeed “A”-5 and -6 stylistically and thematically continue in the mode of “A”-1 and -2. The appropriateness of the title given to “A”-7, “There are different techniques” (quoted from Pound in “A”-1) is obvious enough given that movement’s decisive stylistic redirection, even while it recycles materials and continues themes from the earlier movements. However, “A”-3 and -4 already indicate the stylistic flexibility the poem will allow, with the former in an elegiac lyric mode while the latter is more aggressively collagist than is typical of these early movements. Both of these movements are also more directly autobiographical in focus and deal with elements of the poet’s background that he must move beyond. “A”-3’s subjectively emotional treatment suits this portrayal of alienated rootlessness, which at the same time can be read as the poet’s tentative effort to reenact the aesthetic force he experienced with the *St. Matthew Passion*. Here the Christ figure is suitably modernized in the form of a degraded, socially marginalized suicide, which the poet’s lyrical elegy attempts to redeem through transfiguration without the aid of Bach’s religious ideology. “A”-4 acknowledges the poet’s Jewish heritage as constituent of his makeup while rejecting the option of writing as a Jewish poet—a position that echoes that already articulated in “Poem beginning ‘The.’” This desire to transcend more parochial identities is evident in “A”-6, which is largely taken up with a cross-country trip that broadens the poet’s experience and knowledge of contemporary society and its dysfunction. “A”-7 simultaneously stages and enacts a new realization of the poem as a result of the poet’s quest. The desacralized contemporary setting is transfigured by the poet in the activation of the words of the poem. The fact that the poem resurrects the moribund form of the sonnet (dismissed in “A”-1) is another dimension of this reenactment of Bach’s *Passion*. Bach’s *Passion* thus can be understood as shadowing the first seven movements to serve a number of purposes: an aesthetic ideal which in turn serves as a criterion for social critique, a figural archetype that manifests diversely in the world the poet observes, and a formal model that perhaps holds the key to achieving a work adequate to contemporary experience.

As mentioned, threaded throughout “A”-2 through -7 are at least one or two italicized phrases in each from the libretto of Bach’s *St. Matthew Passion* quoted in “A”-1. In terms of the loosely autobiographical narrative outlined above, these repeats might

¹² “A”-1 & -2: “Come, ye Daughters”; “A”-3 & -4: “Out of the voices”; “A”-5 & -6: “And I”; “A”-7: “There are different techniques.”

function as a lingering reminder of the ideal the poet aspires to replicate in terms of the contemporary world, although the specific lines and their placements are usually thematically relevant as well as adding apocalyptic overtones as they evoke Christ's passion. Also scattered throughout are repeats of other short phrases, although some were deleted when Zukofsky edited the early movements in 1942. "A"-7 recycles quite a few of these, both from the libretto as well as other bits and pieces from the preceding movements. These indicate that while Zukofsky allowed the individual movements to move out in various directions, like the *Cantos*, he was concerned about the question of tying them together and the leitmotiv method of repeating lines from the libretto was an already established musical means of doing so. At the same time, these repeats are far less prominent within the individual movements than, for example, Pound's use of repeated phrases in the *Cantos*, and they often seem merely flickering reminders of the original Bach-Passion motif.¹³ So it remains an open question for the reader whether to emphasize these threads as indicating a bonding motif or to take the first half dozen movements as laying down a gamut of motifs that presumably will be developed later.

"A"-7 marks a decisive moment in the poem's development in a number of ways, and retrospectively, as Zukofsky himself pointed out, is the initial moment where "A" begins to establish a distinctive character ("A"-12.228). The echoing of earlier movements is here foregrounded beyond mere leitmotiv to become what thereafter is Zukofsky's fundamental mode of composition: the direct reworking of found materials. While as a development from "A"-1 through -6 these repeats mark a momentary culmination and a first response to the formal question posed at the end of "A"-6, more importantly "A"-7 looks forward to what follows and the loose autobiographical framework will fall away, even though the autobiographical as material for possible use remains always available. Above all "A"-7 emphatically throws the emphasis onto the verbal action of the poem at the expense of theme or argument, which now must be conveyed by the dynamicism of the text itself. This is most obvious in the foregrounding of the soundscape, and Zukofsky's belief in a well-nigh tactile effect of the poem. While adopting the sonnet form, "A"-7's aggressively percussive manner pulverizes all the characteristics one conventionally associates with this form. If "A"-7 looks forward to what "A" becomes, it is not because it is stylistically typical but because it establishes a range—what in "A"-12 is referred to as upper limit music—within which "A"'s manifold forms will operate.

Note on revisions to "A" 1-7: In the summer of 1942 Zukofsky revised the first six movements, establishing the texts that would be printed in the book versions of "A", although the first of these ("A" 1-12, Origin Press, 1959) was not published for almost two decades. After 1942, Zukofsky never revised new work once it appeared in print, and indeed aside from "A" 1-8 and his pre-1940 critical writings when gathered in *Prepositions* (1967), he almost never revised work once made public. His revisions are typically deletions, so that tightening up appears to be the primary editorial principle. In revising "A" 1-6 it is noticeable that more personal elements are often deleted or truncated—for example passages concerned with Kay and Ricky—suggesting that in

¹³ In speaking about "Poem beginning 'The,'" Zukofsky explicitly objected to Eliot's use of "Wagnerian leit motives" in *The Waste Land* (EP/LZ 78-79).

retrospect the dramatic presence of the poet struck him as of less importance as a cohering principle.¹⁴ Also a fair number of the repeating tags disappear, indicating that Zukofsky was less concerned with this more mechanical means of suggesting cohesion. However, the revisions are not such as to suggest any basic rethinking of the movements as he originally conceived them, and only in the case of “A”-4 dealing with his Jewish heritage, did he significantly rearrange some of the collaging in order to make his central point clearer (see Z-Notes commentary on “A”-4). The textual variants are listed in the Textual Notes on the Z-site.

“A” 8-10 (1935-1940)

The movements of this period reflect both Zukofsky’s growing ambitiousness and his response to the sense of historical crisis, which is most obviously reflected in his incorporation of historical and Marxist materials. Retrospectively we see that “A”-7 is the first of several formally related poems, with the odd numbered movements -7, -9 and -11 all adopting strict traditional poetic forms into which various materials are introduced as content. These compacted movements form centripetal contrasts with their alternating even-numbered movements, “A”-6 through -12, which are all more sprawling collage poems. It is possible to consider some of these as centripetal-centrifugal pairs: “A”-7 answering the cross-country wanderings of “A”-6; “A”-8 and first half of “A”-9 both concerned with the theme of labor; “A”-11 and “A”-12 turning to a more personal and familial address. But before we settle on too neat an alternating pattern of movements, we should also note that the poems written in strict forms extend to the ballade that forms a coda to “A”-8, and outside of “A” to “Mantis.”

Nevertheless, it seems clear enough that the alternation of tight, involuted poems with open ones in “A” is deliberate, which can be understood as dialectically related perspectives that are actually alternating modes of reading or focus. The centripetal movements foreground a relatively oblique verbal surface, breaking up grammatical and syntactical conventions to put greater emphasis on the sonic and polysemous. This in turn requires a concentrated reading where the possibilities of the signifiers are loosened from their more purely communicative or imagistic usages. The centrifugal movements, then, deal with more expansive perspectives, in which the individual collaged pieces may be contextually puzzling but in themselves are not difficult to focus and the reader’s task is the more familiar modernist one of drawing relations between them to build up the implied contexts. However, as already noted it is characteristic that in the really large movements, such as “A”-8 and -12, there are centripetal pieces embedded within them. An odd variation of the patterned movements and the ballade that concludes “A”-8 is a segment of nine stanzas of nine 12 syllable lines each interpolated into “A”-8 (49-52). These stanzas are largely or perhaps entirely composed from pieces of quotations, as is the ballade at the end of the movement. These are evidently based on the model of the cento in music, a composition stitched together from snippets out of prior compositions. This is a method that Zukofsky deployed intermittently in “A”-12 and will become a

¹⁴ Most notable are the elimination are a couple of plays on his own name in “A”-2 and “A”-6, and the deletion of a substantial passage in “A”-4 that refers to Mark Van Doran’s article, “Jewish Students I Have Known” (*Menorah Journal*, June 1927), which refers to Zukofsky in a manner he was not happy about.

major compositional practice in segments of most of the movements of the 1960s through “A”-23. What is clearly indicated in these cases is what has already become the fundamental feature of Zukofsky’s practice: the composition of works directly out of found materials rather than the latter being fit into the framework of an “original” work. This is not only the case with “A” but also with Zukofsky major critical works, which all consist predominately of quotations (“Henry Adams,” *The Writing of Guillaume Apollinaire, A Test of Poetry and Bottom*), and extends to *Catullus* as well. All of this recognizes composition as labor, always a process of rewriting and translation, reworking the cultural inheritance as cultural reproduction.

“A”-8 is the most Canto-like movement of “A”: it consists almost entirely of quotations arranged in collage manner, the materials are predominately social (historical and political), and they make a historical argument in direct response to contemporary events. The historical argument is very roughly that the egalitarian values of the American Revolution have become co-opted by capitalism, whose nefarious effects are registered primarily by the historical and autobiographical writings of Charles F., Brooks and Henry Adams and by the current state of Depression American, but these values are resurfacing and redefined as socialist Russia. As far as it goes, a perfectly typical leftist argument in the United Front period, except for the eccentric inclusion of the Adams brothers, who Zukofsky was convinced foresaw the Russian Revolution. As an overall structure for the movement, this argument is presented backwards: roughly, the first half deals prominently with Marx and the present Soviet experiment, while the latter half switches to a greater emphasis on the writings of the Adams brothers on American history and concludes with Thomas Jefferson and the American Revolution itself. “A”-8 is the only movement of “A” with an overtly announced theme, labor, the dialectic of thought and matter, which is manifest in the dynamic collage of the poem’s presentation. Early in the movement there is a return to Bach’s *St Matthew Passion* with which “A” begins, but this time the attention is on the musician’s practical efforts to put on the production, rather than the aesthetic experience of the performance itself (43-45). Zukofsky indicated that he was working with eight themes in a fugal manner, although it is not evident that he carried this through in any rigorous fashion, and he seems to simply have in mind the now familiar procedure of a collage presentation deploying statement, development, counterpointing and parallels.¹⁵ The overall theme of labor as the dialectical interplay of matter and human effort can by definition subsume anything.

Read alongside “A”-8, the first half of “A”-9 might be considered the micro-level treatment of labor as dialectic, which in “A”-8 is seen as everywhere operative in the public concerns of that movement. The choice of Cavalcanti’s canzone not only embodies an allusion and potential critique of certain arguments in Pound’s *Cantos*, but by being rewritten in terms of Marx’s labor theory of value offers an ingenious

¹⁵ Ahearn quotes and paraphrases a letter to Lorine Niedecker laying out the eight themes and their orderings in the early pages of “A”-8 (75-76). This was at an early stage in the composition of the movement (the letter is dated 9 Nov. 1935). He also reproduces some sketchy retrospective notes apparently made in preparation for “A”-12 giving a somewhat different and confusing list of eight themes (77).

translation of Cavalcanti on love.¹⁶ The labor process, in which the inter-exchange and mutual transformation of both worker and artifact releases their enlarged potentials in the recognition of their mutual participation and self-definition, is under capitalism appropriated as the private property and profit of the few. This dialectic is also a poetics, so “A”-9 in expressing the anguish of the artifact-poem severed from its maker enacts its reconnection through the self-conscious laboriousness of both its production and the reading labor it demands. Just as the inanimate sawhorses of “A”-7 become dancing horses in the words of the poem itself, so seemingly discrete inert commodities are given voice and body in the words of the first half of “A”-9. However, it must be emphasized that the argument of the first half of “A”-9, taken primarily from Marx, is deliberately obscured, even suppressed by the formal emphasis or song. Zukofsky is ultimately less interested in the labor theory of value per se, however ingeniously he has put it into play, than manifesting as song what is endangered by that process.

The specific occasion of “A”-10—the fall of France to Nazi forces—seems to wrench the progress of “A” out of joint. “A”-10 marks a decisive dead-end to at least the manner in which Zukofsky engaged historical and political materials in his poetry throughout the 1930s. “A”-10 is a sweeping condemnation of the failure of both capitalist and socialist powers to halt the advance of fascist aggression in Europe and Asia, which at the moment Zukofsky wrote the movement seemed quite capable of becoming the dominate political order world-wide. As a general structural model Zukofsky adopted the order of the Catholic mass for this movement, and on a number of occasions he stated that he specifically had Bach’s *Mass in B Minor* in mind, although there is no reference to this in the poem itself and the general form of the mass was pre-determined.¹⁷ The intermittent tag phrases or lines that identify the different parts of the mass are, however, largely overwhelmed by the anguished account of the fall of France and the grim events leading up to it. Formally the movement stands somewhere between the patterned and open movements—initially appearing predominately open, there is a deliberately repetitive, even ritualistic manner as the poet desperately attempts to raise disaster to music. The comparatively naked emotion of “A”-10 marks it as unique in “A”, and for many readers uncomfortably un-Zukofskian, but it indicates not only “A”’s formal flexibility but its openness to the vicissitudes of contemporary history. Social dissonance is, for the time being, too overwhelming for Zukofsky to believe that the forces of harmony, social or poetic, can be heard, and he would put “A” aside for most of the next decade.

“A” 9 (second half) -12 (1948-1951)

Indeed, Zukofsky did not work on “A” for most of the next two decades, except for the period 1948-1951 when he wrote these two and a half movements—“A”-12 itself more than doubled the page count of the prior movements combined. Formally, these movements continue established patterns, but also mark the personal and historical changes that required a rethinking of the poem. Most obviously, the second half of “A”-9

¹⁶ See the Z-Notes commentary on Zukofsky, Williams & Pound for a discussion of the first half of “A”-9 as a response to Pound’s Cavalcanti.

¹⁷ An undated note on a typescript of “A”-10 states that Bach’s *Mass* suggested the form of the movement (HRC 3.4).

completed that movement in the double-canzone form promised a decade earlier, while “A”-11 and -12 continue the alternation of formally closed with expansive collaged poems. In addition, there is the often remarked change of focus from the public and historical, especially in “A”-8 and “A”-10, to the domestic and everyday sphere. “A” offers ample evidence for arguments stressing either a sharp break or fundamental continuities, depending on what one chooses to focus on. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that the post-World War II movements register the seismic historical shift marked by the war—for Zukofsky writing within a context of the United Front against fascism was radically reconfigured in terms of the Cold War, which evidently means that a more direct engagement with contemporary history is no longer viable. These big events are of course coterminous with Zukofsky’s marriage (1939), fatherhood (1943) and acceptance of permanent employment at the Polytechnic Institute of Brooklyn teaching science and engineering students (1947). It is also a time when the reception of the more experimental tendencies of modernism was in abeyance so that the public prospects for large-scale works in this mode were hardly encouraging.

While it is sometimes assumed that the second half of “A”-9 was belatedly added as a critique or abandonment of the “political” first half, in fact Zukofsky had projected a double-canzone from the outset and that its theme would be love (*EP/LZ* 203). There is little reason to assume that it is substantially different from what Zukofsky would have written prior to World War II, since he intended an affirmative complement to the hellish condition expressed in the first half, already implicit in the singing of the canzone form. The use of Spinoza is also logical given that he, along with Shakespeare and Henry Adams, was among Zukofsky’s most abiding intellectual interests. The opening lines of “A”-8, which explicitly rewrite Spinoza in Marxian terms, indicate that Zukofsky saw the two as complementary thinkers. Since the second half replicates most of the rhyme words, both terminal and internal, from the first half, a good portion of the former carries over into the latter. But if all of this suggests that the second half should not be read as a critical revision of the first half, it also indicates that reading the first half of “A”-9 on its own, even as a strictly 1930s poem, is incomplete and Zukofsky always believed that the comic or utopian potential was implied within the tragic first half.

If “A”-11 continues the pattern of alternating highly formalist movements, it is also noticeably more relaxed than the earlier formalistic works, especially “A”-9. It is complexly metaphysical in manner, but with patience it is not difficult to figure out what the speaker is saying. Zukofsky takes from the Cavalcanti ballade that supplies the formal pattern for the movement the conventional conceit of the poet addressing his poem as he sends it on its way to the beloved. This is further complicated by Zukofsky speaking from the viewpoint of being dead. The deliberately formal manner of “A”-11 is an odd way for a modern poet to address one’s intimates and indicates that this is all an allegory of the relationship between poet, poem and readers, and how one exists in readers after death (which might be thought of as simply when the poem leaves the poet to meet its social fate). This general allegory of composition and reading as the perpetuation of cultural inheritance has already been well established in the poem, and one could say it is implied from the first page in the resurrection motif of *St. Matthew Passion*, but becomes even more self-consciously evident in manifold ways throughout the course of “A”. This movement announces the centrality of the poet’s family—wife and son—which will remain throughout the remainder of the poem, but Zukofsky makes little effort to

dramatize the family context or even to give much individualized personality to his immediate family members. “A”-11 affirms his family as the immediate context both out of which and for which he writes, the figure of human belonging, responsibility, and reciprocation—in a word, love—that motivates any poetry or indeed any cultural labor. The version of love offered in the latter half of “A”-9 and in “A”-11 remains fundamental throughout Zukofsky’s writings, and it is notable how in this respect he deliberately rewrites the erotic-spiritualized tradition love of Cavalcanti’s poetry. The anarchic and self-affirming propensities of erotic or libidinal love is all but non-existent in Zukofsky’s work, and his version of love is firmly social, it is the desire to be and intertwine with others always already implied in any language use, which can be silence as well.

While “A”-12 continues the general use of collage seen extensively in many of the early movements, it is on such a scale as to dwarf what has gone before, and its relations with the preceding movements is by no means obvious. Content-wise “A”-12 establishes the shift of focus that will characterize his post-World War II work: the prominent appearance of his immediate family, the almost complete abandonment of historical sources for more literary and especially philosophical as well as ephemeral quotidian materials. But it is not so much the content of this movement that indicates the redirection of “A”, as the abandonment of the framework of crisis, social or personal, within which to organize the diverse materials.

As a general observation it is worth noting that after World War II, Zukofsky develops an increasingly improvisational approach and each movement seems to be *sui generis*. For the long movements, his typical practice was to collect materials in a notebook he carried around and then work up the given poem from these materials. These materials are almost entirely quotations; there is nothing like diary entries, only rare reflections on or rough ideas for new work, except sometimes there are drafts of short pieces eventually worked into the final poem. These quotations can come from anywhere: everyday conversation and observation, correspondence, the newspaper or other media, as well as his reading—all mixed randomly together as they came to him. There is no evidence that Zukofsky collected these quotations with any preconceptions, but to a considerable degree allowed the materials to determine the composition. Although at times he worked and reworked given passages, there are no multiple drafts or rearranging of even the long movements—unless he discarded these intermediate stages, which seems unlikely. Beginning tentatively with “A”-13 (1960), Zukofsky usually adopted flexible pre-determined forms—mostly a word count line often broken up into neat stanzas (“A”-15 and the three short movements “A”-16, -17 and -20 are exceptions). So it is often as if he is pouring his miscellaneous notebook materials into these loose forms, to use an image he himself suggests in “A”-13 (306).

It is probably “A”-12 that first establishes this general mode of composition, working up the poem out of the accumulated materials on hand, paying attention to recurrences and relations but without imposing any overall structure or framework to organize the materials. The focus is localized in the verbal interest of the poem and the development of various strands or segments around which accumulate all manner of relations, rather than overarching themes or development. In “A”-12 Zukofsky explicitly invokes the formal model of Bach’s encyclopedic *The Art of Fugue*, and he even lists four “notes” correlated with the letters of Bach’s name: Blest, Ardent, Celia and Happy. Again this fugal model should be taken as suggestive rather than as supplying a formal

template, and obviously as themes these “notes” are so general that all manner of materials could be included under one or the other—nor are all the materials included so cheerful as these particular “notes” would suggest. It is perfectly plausible to take “A”-12 as emulating the general conception of Bach’s assemblage that allows for endless variation and even identifiable sub-works within the larger gathering. The notes of Bach’s name have often been correlated with Spinoza (Baruch), Aristotle, Celia and Paracelsus (whose surname was von Hohenheim) respectively, all of whom appear or are worked with in extended passages in the movement. Nevertheless, no one has yet offered a plausible reading of the overall poem as organized in any rigorous sense by these specific four names/topics. The basic fugal conception of development out of a given set of materials with accumulative variations and counterpoint can serve as a rough model for what Zukofsky is doing but hardly explains much or helps the reader feel oriented. The underlying theme or motivation is that living and composing are identical: we necessarily compose or weave together our lives out of the materials that are thrown up wherever we happen to find ourselves, and the composing or reading of the poem is merely an extension or variation on that process. In this sense, “A”-12 can be seen as an extension or variation on “A”-8’s “labor.”

A feature of “A”-12 that will become typical in subsequent movements is delineated sequences embedded in the larger poem. Although I have characterized “A”-12 overall as a collage text, it nonetheless has many segments that are formally identifiable: these may be broken up into visual stanzas, or long unbroken stretches, or block-like paragraphs among the many stretches of irregular, usually short pieces. Many of these visually identifiable segments also are worked from a single source, especially Spinoza, Aristotle, Lucretius, Paracelsus, as well as shorter pieces from Dante, Zechariah and the sayings of Hasidic masters. The handling of these source materials varies: in the case of Spinoza the actual argument is brought over, albeit elliptically, whereas with others such as Dante pieces seem randomly stitched together into something that appears to have little enough to do with the original sense of the source. This latter mode of composition will become increasingly prominent in the movements of the 1960s, but at this point he usually does not scramble the sense of his sources too much—the primary difficulty is the relationships between pieces rather than within them.

One has the impression that Zukofsky threw everything he had on hand into “A”-12, even a checklist of abandoned projects which now achieve a kind of realization as this very catalog in the poem. The immense size of the movement is apparently intended to contain the poet or reader rather than creating the illusion of being able to contain it. But if read sympathetically, it is not merely random since the activity of working through materials, of ordering and composing is everywhere evident. The end result is not a representation of quotidian life, although to a degree it may mimic the rhythms of the everyday, nor is Zukofsky interested in capturing fleeting moments of authentic experience or intensities. Rather, the poem is a continuous action of constructing orders, the way we can and must make senses out of whatever comes to hand—it is never anything more or less than poetry making.

“A” 13-21 (1960-1967)

After spending most of the 1950s working compulsively at *Bottom: on Shakespeare*, Zukofsky finally brought this work to conclusion in the spring of 1960 and

in the latter part of the year returned to “A” after a nine year hiatus. In the previous year Cid Corman’s Origin Press had published “A” 1-12, the first book publication of “A” and the first time “A”-12 had appeared aside from a few brief passages. Undoubtedly the preparation of the manuscript, which included the light revision of “A”-8, stimulated Zukofsky to consider how he might go on. Also this publication was the direct result of the attention he began to receive, marginal as it may have been, from younger poets such as Robert Duncan and Robert Creeley beginning around the mid-1950s. Promptly on finishing *Bottom* he wrote the long, five part “A”-13 in the latter half of 1960, then concentrated for several years on the translation of Catullus with Celia, except for the composition of three short movements (“A”-16, -17, -20) in 1963. With Catullus complete, Zukofsky pushed on, composing in less than three years (August 1964 to May 1967) five long movements that took the poem through “A”-21. The longer movements of “A” 13-19 in particular contain some of Zukofsky’s most attractive work, and it is unfortunate that they have on the whole attracted little commentary.

Looking over the 1960s movements, what is immediately striking is their formal heterogeneity, as if each movement is formally reconceived from scratch. Perhaps the only plausible reason to group them together is that Zukofsky published them as a volume and the relatively short period during which they were all composed. However, it is apparent that this very formal diversity is integral to Zukofsky’s conception of the poem, and this is matched by the internal heterogeneity of the later movements as well. In general terms we can identify three formally distinct groups: the longer movements through “A”-19 continue the practice established in “A”-12 of improvisationally working up the poems out of the more or less randomly collected materials in his notebooks; on the other hand, there are the three short movements, in the case of the four-word “A”-16 quite minimalist, all composed in 1963; and finally “A”-21 is a programmatic work, since it predominately consists of a idiosyncratic translation of Plautus’ *Rudens*, and this approach looks forward to the pre-planned epic-like structures of “A”-22 & -23.

Taking the short movements first, these all have an occasional quality which in part explains why they are numbered out of chronological order, with “A”-17 written as a homage to William Carlos Williams immediately after his death but numbered according to the date of his birthday and “A”-20 composed for Paul’s 20th birthday. Although Zukofsky seems to have abandoned the sequence of odd-numbered patterned poems that go back to “A”-7, one might see these short movements as serving something of the same function in a different manner, that is, as counterbalancing the longer movements and, if nothing else, problematizing any expectations as to what a given movement of this long poem should look like. Surely this is the case with “A”-16, as if to suggest it can be said in few or almost no words as well as in long spiels. This minimalist movement also foregrounds the visual page, a significant element of Zukofsky’s presentation in “A” generally: simply flipping through the pages of “A” and *The Maximus Poems* one gets a visual sense of what to expect and the differences between these two poems. “A”-17 and -20, although very different from the earlier patterned movements, nevertheless retain a formal pre-determined quality. The former is a strictly chronological presentation of mostly self-quotations documenting Zukofsky’s poetic relationship with Williams, although in many cases the quotations’ relevance to Williams is not immediately obvious. “A”-20 evokes serialism (Zukofsky calls it a tone row), a formal technique he sometimes used elsewhere, although not often. The first part of the poem consists of rearrangements

of titles of his son's compositions, which are then juxtaposed with a more "innocent" traditional lyric written by him when he was nine. The poem implies the father's double-vision of his son as young and now grown up, which can also be read as a paradigm for the history of music or poetry, that is, how past work comes up through in present work. In any case, all these shorter occasional movements can plausibly be seen as diverse manifestations of more centrifugal poems when seen alongside the longer movements that we think of as more typical of "A" in this period.

The longer movements manifest even more clearly Zukofsky's determination to avoid formal repetition, so that the collage manner of "A"-12 threatens to become too predictable. Since he has established his basic *modus operandi* of working up the longer movements out of the randomly gathered materials in his notebooks, he began to adopt flexible pre-determined forms into which these materials would be worked. As with "A"-12, no given theme or argument is allowed to develop sufficiently to become a dominate, rather there is more like a crisscrossing of possible motifs, tones, images that never add up to a paraphrasable argument. The textual surface insistently compels the reader to engage closely with the particulars of the text rather than comfortably riding some more allegorical level of continuity. An inevitable manifestation of this tendency is the considerable increase in verbal play, particularly enhancing the sonic dimension of the poems—punning, polysemousness and the intermittent incorporation of homophonic translation as a direct legacy of *Catullus*. At the same time, Zukofsky develops an idiolect, a voice that seems to be talking sense to us that often remains just out of reach, or lines that seem clear enough seamlessly segueing into those that do not. In the first instance this is the result of condensation and ellipsis but tends to become its own flexible style that again pushes the attention to discrete words and their relations over the immediate absorption of meaning. The poetic texture also tends to be very diverse, constantly shifting in tone and register. If all this was intended to push the poetry toward the musical limit, a desire inherent in the words themselves, at the same time Zukofsky always maintained a hybrid or mixed conception of the poetic texture and did not think of the musical upper limit as a purification process.

Beginning with "A"-14 (1964) Zukofsky becomes fascinated with using a word-count line, which is found in all the remaining movements of "A" with the exception of "A"-15 and continues into his final work, *80 Flowers*.¹⁸ He will experiment with a range of word-count lines, from the short lines of "A"-14 (1, 2 and 3-word lines) to the long lines of "A"-18 (8-word lines), until finally settling on a 5-word line for the main body (translation) of "A"-21 and all his poetry thereafter. This late interest in the word-count line has some parallels with Williams' need late in his career for the variable foot, as it represents a degree of working regularity with a high degree of flexibility. While maintaining the line as a recognizable, visual unit, word counting tends to work against the line as a structural, much less grammatical or semantic unit, so that there a productive and unpredictable tension between line and syntax. Judging from some passages drafted

¹⁸ It is perhaps worth noting that although *80 Flowers* continues Zukofsky's use of a five-word line, he shamelessly cheats, most obviously by the frequent creation of hyphenated word compounds, which count as one word (these poems are heavy on legitimate compound words to begin with). There is always this concern not to fall into too predictable habits.

in his notebooks, Zukofsky tended to write them out prose fashion and then subsequently cut them to the word-count shape he decided on. I would suggest that Zukofsky's impetus here is a working procedure that feels back to a more visceral and fluid sense of the language, relatively liberated from socializing codes and habits. Back in 1930 Zukofsky had surveyed contemporary American poets according to how successfully they had shaken off the ghost of metered verse—as if he took quite literally Pound's dicta "to break the pentameter." Zukofsky was not interested in releasing some repressed or more authentic language, and in an important sense the word-count line overtly wears its artifice, even while it allows for naturalness. Rather Zukofsky's interest was always in feeling out the possibilities and variations there inside the language. This can be imagined in terms of a Spinozian model where any entity is necessarily always creatively realizing itself within infinitely complex deterministic structures. The cutting of the word-count lines becomes part of the discovery process, not least for the reader who never knows with certainty what the line unit means. In theory one might think that the variations with a shorter or longer word-count line should not make much difference, but in practice they result in very distinct textures, as any quick comparison of a page of "A"-14 with "A"-18 will show. Zukofsky was clearly attracted to how such a simple formal restraint (if "restraint" is the right term in this case) can significantly affect the feel of the composition.

Another common feature of the long 60s movement, which already appeared in "A"-12, is segments worked from a single source, which are now tipped into whatever pre-determined form Zukofsky decided on. Major examples are the use of Aristotle (both *Parts of Animals* and *Politics*) in "A"-13 (268-272), *Paradise Lost* in "A"-14 (319-325) and Izaak Walton's *The Compleat Angler* in "A"-21 (477-480). In these cases, Zukofsky snips small bits from the source text and weaves them together into new poetry. It should not be assumed that these are critiques or rewritings of the original, but rather a procedural method, a writing with the source text. Another major instance is a few pages in "A"-19 worked from various short poems of Mallarmé, but in this case, since he is working from the French text, there are the added transmutations of translation and homophonic suggestion (409-411). I have already mentioned some variations on this method with regard to horse passages in "A"-13 and -14 that Zukofsky worked from quotations via the index of *Bottom*. In other instances, Zukofsky may cluster distinct compositional practices loosely related by content. In "A"-14 there is a passage focusing on a scroll of a poem by the Japanese poet Ryokan that Cid Corman had lent Zukofsky, which consists of a speculative reading of the cursive calligraphy he cannot read, some quotations out of a letter from Corman including his translation of Ryokan's poem, and some remarks about the use of this scroll on the cover of *I's pronounced eyes* which the publishers unknowingly printed up-side-down (325-326). There is a similar passage that concludes the same movement concerning the Egyptian Book of the Dead: some remarks about how Zukofsky purchased the book, a combination of snippets from and reflections on the preface and finally a reading of a line of hieroglyphics, which is of course translated in the text, but here Zukofsky simply speculatively reads them off visually. The reading of texts which the poet cannot "read" is suggestive and has a relationship with his interest in homophonic translations, but for our present purposes I simply note the various ad hoc ways that Zukofsky generates his poem out of whatever comes to hand. In its most basic sense Zukofsky simply reads off whatever he sees and sees where the words take

him. These instances illustrate Zukofsky's focus on compositional inventiveness, although more often than not, his procedure is hidden. The poems are predominately built up of such segments produced in various ways without much concern for content development, or at least the associative relations are unpredictable and are more a matter of multi-dimensional thickening rather than developed statement or theme.

A final general observation on the 1960s movements: despite the appearance of diverse singularity, Zukofsky does often add in little links between them. Perhaps the most significant is the sequence "A"-15 through -17, the former ending with an enigmatic flower coda, which relates to the wind flower of "A"-16, which in turn is echoed by the anemones (from Greek meaning wind flower) at the opening of "A"-17, Zukofsky's homage to Williams. Since Williams also figures prominently in "A"-15, this sequence can be considered as a Williams group. "A"-18 opens with "an unearthing," which might be related to the recently deceased Williams of the preceding movement, and this movement is full of the ghosts. "A"-19 ends enigmatically with mention of nine becoming twenty, which makes little sense until we read the following movement that gives a portrait of sorts of the poet's son at twenty and nine years old. While such links are obviously deliberate, once noted one has to admit their arbitrariness, rather like the insertion of segments of Bach's biography across "A"-14, -15 and -18. The movements link and grow out of each other in any number of ways, but none offers some key to explain how they go together, just as the parts of a partita may have no more relation than the fact that they work from a set of different dance tunes.

Taking a brief look at the formal characteristics of the individual long movements, "A"-13 is one of the few movements that has a title, indicating a structural analogy with a partita or musical suite. Although Bach composed a number of partitas, including for solo violin, there is no reason to assume that Zukofsky has a particular musical composition in mind, much less that there is any close structural imitation; rather it is the general conception of a set of compositions based on a variety of tunes that interests him—as if going over the same ground in different measures. Three of the five parts of "A"-13 are in flexible unbroken free verse, while the other two use very different stanza forms. Somewhat untypically, each part has at least a sketchy, mundane setting: a father giving advice to his son, a walk with the son, the poet composing at night while his son and wife sleep, an inventory of the poet's wallet and finally the poet stands at his window examining the architectural features of the city. None of these settings are constraining but rather ordinary starting points from which the poem can wander anywhere and incorporate the various textual re-workings described above. The point is simply that we make our lives out of wherever we find ourselves and whatever comes to hand, and the composition of the poem is simply an extension of this—a basic assumption already established in "A"-12. Out of this all manner of motifs can arise, but again no dominant under which to organize the plethora of textual detail, rather there is what I have referred to as a constant thickening of the text, a cluster, since after all we are always in it.

"A"-14 has a distinctive look and feel because of its deployment of a short word-count line divided up into stanzas, moving rapidly through a dizzying mélange of materials. The movement has a relatively short opening using one word per line and mostly ten lines stanzas, then there are two very approximate halves in two and then three count lines shaped into three line stanzas, until the last half page when this is reversed,

ending with Zukofsky's Book of the Dead "translation" as 16 single words down the page. The overall effect creates a curious tension: on the one hand this minimalization of words per line draws attention to the individual words and even syllables and would seem to demand a slow mulling, yet I find myself reading it rapidly (Rawroth style) and the details seem to pour past the intellect and ear, a stream of diverse topics and items that never come into conceptual focus. This sense is enhanced by the persistent, often comical verbal play, and the poem demands to be mouthed and heard. In addition to the materials already mentioned, there are a couple segments worked from Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness* that are related to incidences from the civil rights struggle of the time, which receives particularly emphasis in this movement (317-310, 328-329). Such newsy materials—most persistently the space race—will intrude significantly into most of the longer 60s movements as they register the pressures of contemporary history.

Near the beginning of "A"-14 is the announcement that this is to be the first of eleven movements beginning with "an," the significance of which no one has explained beyond finishing off the forms of the articles: the, a, an.¹⁹ Also the opening one-word per line stanzas of "A"-14 are the first detachable prelude that will characterize all the longer movements through "A"-22—in some cases these were published separately as discrete poems. As mentioned, "A"-14 introduces a significant passage of Bach's biography and this will be followed up in "A"-15 and "A"-18—altogether presenting the main facts in order: his early life ("A"-14.338-343), period in Weimar ("A"-15.366-367) and period in Cöthen ("A"-18.405). Presumably the last and most important period of Bach's life in Leipzig was sufficiently covered by the appearances of *St. Matthew Passion* in the early movements. While there are some local efforts to work these segments into the individual movements, there is no apparent concern whether they tie into the overall motifs or tone, but instead seem to deliberately cut across the movements.

The antithetical complement to "A"-14 is "A"-18, using a long eight-word line divided into very irregular large blocks. The overall effect is claustrophobic and clogged, which is augmented by the seeming random juxtaposition of small pieces of textual materials that characterizes the bulk of the movement. There is an unusual amount of black humor, including a newspaper article about the attempt by Vietnamese authorities to kill a sacred fish which is the first of many references to the Vietnam war, the dominate contemporary event of the movement. There is a long passage concerned with the *baloma*, the spirits of the dead of the Troubriand Islanders, from the anthropological works of Bronislaw Malinowski, and there are quite a few other ghostly presences, including some supplied by Henry James. The overall mood is decided dark, but typically Zukofsky never allows any tone to completely dominate and particularly the end segment, mainly worked from various writings of Jonathan Swift, are more farcically comical and poke fun at the pretenses of poets.

Written more or less simultaneously with "A"-18, "A"-19 is entirely different in mood, which is presented in a form closer to "A"-14: a two-word line divided into 13 line stanzas. The effect is again fast moving and lyrical, although this movement is to an unusual degree neatly divided up into distinct segments determined by the source

¹⁹ Zukofsky apparently planned this shift to "an" from very early on, as he mentioned to Pound his intention that the movements in the latter half of "A" would begin with "an" in a 7 Dec. 1931 letter (*EP/LZ* 112).

materials primarily drawn upon. In order these are: free re-workings from Mallarmé's short poems; an account of the Paganini Prize, a violin competition in which the poet's son participated; Pythagorean number philosophy; a intricate dialog with Mallarmé's notes for his *Le Livre* project; the Hellenistic skeptic Sextus Empiricus; and then the final few pages are more miscellaneous but conclude with a circling back to the beginning. Music, poetry, numbers and skepticism form a mix of major Zukofsky interests revolving around the topics of inheritance and legacy in a witty lyrical mode that is arguably the most accessible of all the longer movements of "A".

"A"-15 is in many respects an oddity among the 60s movements, as formally it reverts to the collage manner more typical of "A"-12 and earlier movements. It also appears to have a more definite and topical focus, the assassination of President Kennedy, and it is the closest of the late movements to an engagement with history in the manner of "A"-8. At the same time, the assemblage is bewilderingly diverse, not simply in terms of content but even more so in manner, ranging from the homophonic rendition of selections from the Book of Job to the very large block quotation from Edward Gibbons' masterpiece of Enlightenment rationality, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, with all manner of other materials, high and low, in between. While one would presume the movement should be an elegy for JFK and Williams Carlos Williams, who figures large in the poem and died the same year as the president, Zukofsky refuses to allow sufficient consistency of tone for the poem simply to be described as a lament. Nevertheless, the major blocks of materials seem related by the theme of historical violence (or perhaps simply of history *tout court*) and its victims.

By the time he completed "A"-19 Zukofsky seems to have exhausted his improvisational method of composing out of the materials gathered in his notebooks, if for no other reason than that he was composing too rapidly to collect sufficient materials in his usual random manner. In any case, "A"-21 marks the beginning of a more programmatic approach that will characterize his final poems through *80 Flowers*, all large-scale works with precisely pre-determined parameters. Zukofsky's translation of Plautus' *Rudens*, which determines the overall structure of the movement, is not in the homophonic manner of *Catullus* but does have its set rules. In this case, Zukofsky deploys a five-word line, each line rendering a line of the Latin text (as usual, there are some irregularities). Since Plautus uses a quite long line this entails a good deal of elliptical condensation, but with some familiarity Zukofsky's version is not difficult and after all Plautus is not a complicated poet. What Zukofsky is interested in is the antic repartee of the play. But beyond Plautus's play, Zukofsky makes numerous additions, mostly between scenes, which he labels "voice offs." These self-contained poems are formally very diverse and push Zukofsky's word play and obscurity to new extremes, usually commenting obliquely, often socially, on the action of the play—whose primary theme is ownership. These voice offs are highly inventive and it is odd they have received so little notice—in many respects they anticipate the verbal density of "A"-22 & -23, although often in a jauntier vein. The unexpected insertion of a complete play into "A", again pushes the formal absorption of the overall poem and in this case highlights the performative, the always acting out with others implied in any language use. Consequently, it is not surprising that this is the most political of Zukofsky's late works and recalls his single attempt at original drama, *Arise, Arise*, from the 1930s.

“A” 22-24 (1968-1974)

Although numerically designated as the conclusion of “A”, “A”-24 comes chronologically prior to “A”-22 and -23. This is due to its occasional nature in the sense that, like “A”-17 and -20, its composition and numbering is tied to biographical circumstances. In presenting the “LZ Masque” to Louis as a birthday present in 1968, Celia presumably had no idea or intention that it be thought of as a part of “A”. It is probably more of a question why Zukofsky decided to incorporate the masque into “A” than why he then decided it should be designated number 24 (rather than 22 which chronology would have dictated), since it so obviously presents itself as a summation of sorts of Zukofsky’s life work. Celia’s assemblage explicitly links “A” with the larger body of Zukofsky’s writings, which he had insisted represented one manifold work. All the better that these interrelations are suggested on the formal model of music. Furthermore, that the masque is an overtly performance text, not only suggests an opening out of the generic definition or limits of “A”, as already indicated with “A”-21, but signifies a central aspect of Zukofsky’s poetics going back at least to those inert sawhorses made to dance in “A”-7: that poetry, as writing or reading, is a felt activity that involves and awakes the body to its existence in the world. If “A”-24 strikes us as unreadable or seems to require being read as if with others, then all that would no doubt suit Zukofsky’s conception of “A”. But what about concluding one’s life work with a composition made by someone else? Obviously this someone else is not just anybody, but the one who Zukofsky had long insisted was necessarily omnipresent in his work, its “tutelary spirit” as he says in “A”-12 (241). Given Zukofsky’s own unusually self-conscious reworking of other texts, it seems only appropriate to allow Celia to complete by continuing his “own” writings—a fulfillment in a sense before his death of the hope expressed in “A”-11. Thus “A” continues in one of its ideal readers as rewriting and new work, that is, love—an example or invitation to us all. In this sense, “A”-24 is not simply the conclusion to “A” but is something beyond it, indicating what was already implied in the design of “A”, that there can be no definitive conclusion to such works, or any work for that matter, only more work or reading.

Having his conclusion already before him, Zukofsky then had to finish up the final two movements, to come up with his own conclusion. If so much of “A” seems to deny the viability of the epic in all but length, “A”-22 and -23 unequivocally assert an epic ambition. Following “A”-21, these were composed on a programmatic plan as two complementary poems, somewhat in the manner of the two halves of “A”-9 on a grand scale. Each movement consists of 1000 lines of five words each: the main body of 800 unbroken lines is worked from materials in chronological order, while the framing 100 lines at the beginning and end are broken into five line stanzas and the materials are more freely used, much like the procedure for the longer movements of the 1960s. As always there are irregularities introduced into this basic plan in the framing segments, but they need not concern us here. The materials drawn on in the main body of “A”-22 are generally historical while those of “A”-23 are literary, but again these are only loose working distinctions. Each chronological sequence was meant to cover or draw on materials covering 6000 years of literate culture, although in fact they reach back to the archaic or even primordial as it survives textually. This plan would seem to clearly project an epic intent, which is reinforced by the inclusion of a condensed version of *Gilgamesh*, the longest single passage in either poem. However, except for the *Gilgamesh*

passage which has a discernable narrative, all this historical scale and ambition is buried, and there is no attempt to create any sense of historical progression or stylistic variation, as in the case of Joyce's Oxen of the Sun chapter. Ultimately all this elaborate scaffolding is just that: a plan or compositional procedure to get the poem written and to engage with a very broad spectrum of the texts that Zukofsky loved to read.

The poems can be read as the natural culmination of Zukofsky's work and of "A". Despite the superficial appearance that he is more systematically gathering and organizing his raw materials in order to cover a complete sweep of history, what he uses is no less random than his previous notebook gatherings and simply happens to be whatever he wanted to read. He is perfectly willing to be flexible about how he places his materials in his chronology: so Robert Herrick appears with Isaiah, represented by a poem that works from an idea in that book of the Bible, or Livy in the Roman segment is represented by Machiavelli's *Discourses on Livy*. It does not matter because to begin with chronology is a perfectly arbitrary manner of ordering materials and thus of knowing. In any case, all Zukofsky's various techniques are brought to bear to empty the original materials of their specificity and to make them sing, so that the original quotations are punched out, re-worded, re-arranged, re-worked and homophonically transcribed to create locally interesting verbal constructions free of the historical claims of the materials. Also characteristic is the diversity of the verbal surface, so what appears to be straight quotation can be run together with what is an enigmatic homophonic rendering, or there can be abrupt shifts in tone or linguistic register. All this, then, can be seen as the ultimate flowering of Zukofsky's general tendency to draw out the latent possibilities within the verbal matter of the texts, what is already there but unnoticed because of the habitual or conceptual blinders that direct our attention. But if Zukofsky is feeling for the possibilities latent in his materials, the resultant text is handed over to the reader to be eyed and sounded for their interest and pleasure. Implicit is a vision of Language as a body perpetually in the process of realizing itself, where all languages impinge and intersect with each other, and where any word can lead to all others. So "A"-23's concluding 26 lines weave an alphabetic song, ending with the observation that it all comes down to "us"—poet, readers, everyone, including the dead.

As culminations of "A", "A"-24 on the one hand and "A"-22 & -23 on the other offer alternative possibilities pointing in different directions. The latter represent a roughly diachronic apotheosis of Zukofsky's various methods of textual transmutation. In a sense all the previous forms of "A" are amalgamated and can then be seen as continuing on into *80 Flowers* which continues the methods of these "last" movements. On the other hand, "A"-24 takes a more synchronic perspective, the possibility of coordinating "A" with all the other works of Zukofsky's corpus and a musical setting.

Index to "A" (1978)

The final touch to "A" was added during the poem's preparation for its complete publication in 1978, when the index was prepared. We are told that Celia suggested the idea of an index, Louis proceeded to index solely the words "a," "an" and "the"—suitably eccentric, but Celia apparently determined on something more orthodox, if an index to a poem can be considered as such. What we have is Celia's index checked and pruned by Louis and apparently including his incomplete indexing of "a," "an" and "the"—or at least this might explain the patently arbitrary look of these three entries. It has been

suggested, plausibly enough, that the index can serve as a guide to reading, highlighting certain terms and enabling one to trace them as cluster points across the poem. Zukofsky had, somewhat more conventionally, added an index to the expanded edition of *Prepositions*, entitled “Index to Definitions,” that consists entirely of nouns but no names, whose shifting definitions could then be tracked. This is an obvious way one could deploy the index to “*A*”. The index lists the appearance of words, rather than ideas or references—so, for example, under Marx you will find listed the appearances of “Marx” but not when Marx is only quoted, paraphrased or referred to. This is the basic principle but typically one finds exceptions, and in some cases obscurities are clarified—for example, “Old Tacit” in “*A*”-18 is indexed under Pound. The index can be pursued to simultaneously decompose and re-compose the text of “*A*” as more conventionally approached, but as we have seen the very lack of clear formal guides has all along authorized any number of approaches. The index goes even further in handing over such authority to the reader to find or make new relations, as well as pointing out that it comes down to the words.

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