

## "a point flowers into every line": *Thanks to the Dictionary* & some related poems

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Today *Thanks to the Dictionary* should cause no undue difficulties for readers familiar with the more formally innovative Anglo-American poetries of the past half-century. Bemusement is primarily due to the fact that the work comes out of a time and place, 1932-34 New York, one does not typically associate with such radically ruptured texts. However, if we keep in mind that the young Zukofsky was paying attention to Stein and Joyce (including *Finnegans Wake*) and had just completed a highly unorthodox study of Apollinaire that involved some familiarity with Surrealism and related developments in France, then *Thanks to the Dictionary* appears less of an eccentricity.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps most important were the early prose or mixed prose and poetry works of William Carlos Williams from *Kora in Hell* through *A Novelette and Other Prose* (1920-1932), whose seminal importance Zukofsky was one of the first to recognize and in some of which he had a significant editorial hand. In "Sincerity and Objectification" (1931) he went so far as to suggest that *Spring and All* was the equivalent of Wordsworth's Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* for the 20th century (*Prep+* 198).

Near the end of "A"-12 (1951), there is a catalog of unrealized projects from the 1930s as the poet is apparently clearing old notes out of his desk, and a handful of these sound like performance works out of the 1960s: for example, "an inner stage for film, / A book stalks the proscenium, / Elevators hum in the wings, / Greek chorus / Rides Toonerville trolley" ("A" 253). Among the list are two "novels," *The Little Girl* and *That People the Sunbeams*, each with a brief excerpt, the latter particularly in a highly disjunctive mode that bears a strong family resemblance to *Thanks to the Dictionary*.<sup>2</sup> If nothing else these brief fragments gesture at a direction that could have become a larger part of Zukofsky's writing under more receptive circumstances. When he briefly returned to fiction in the early 1940s (*Ferdinand*, "A Keystone Comedy" and "It Was") and again in the early 1950s (beginning what became *Little*), he chose a more familiar mode, and indeed these works, for all their local oddities, are the most conventional in the Zukofsky canon. However, if *Thanks* appears a minor side-alley ending in a cul-de-sac within the larger metropolis of Zukofsky's work, I will argue that it manifests many of his most basic aesthetic assumptions and practices that he not only maintained with remarkable consistency throughout his career but that made possible the range of his innovative and far-out later works, from *Bottom* to *Catullus* to the late movements of "A" and *80 Flowers*. Of all the Anglo-American modernists who began in the 1920s and 30s, Zukofsky was one of the few able to resist the reaction against formal innovation

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1 Mark Scroggins has pointed out the connection between *Thanks to the Dictionary* and the avant-garde milieu of the time, see *The Poem of a Life: A Biography of Louis Zukofsky* (Shoemaker Hoard, 2007): 137-139. Curiously, a couple of Zukofsky's very earliest publications outside student journals were in Samuel Roth's *Two Worlds* (Sept. and Dec. 1925), alongside early excerpts from *Finnegans Wake* (under the title, "A New Unnamed Work").

2 The first excerpt involves a troubled relationship with a young girl, which appears to emulate Henry James, the novelist Zukofsky most admired, combined with the interpolation of a found text; the second sample is aggressively discontinuous giving the effect of a cutup text ("A" 254-256). There survives a brief "Plan" for *That People the Sunbeams* (the title is from Milton) with an "Explanation" that reads in part: "This book of the nature of things - considering potential and passing to Kinetics and finally into Kinesthetics" (HRC 16.6). As we will see, this idea of textual kinetics or kinesthetics is central to Zukofsky's intentions with *Thanks*.

that dominated the mid-century and wrote his most daring and ambitious works in the 1960s and 70s when the radical impulse of Anglo-American modernism was revived by a younger generation of writers.<sup>3</sup>

## I - Procedure

At the risk of tediousness, I begin with a description of *Thanks to the Dictionary* and the peculiar method Zukofsky devised for its composition. There are two text strands, a narrative of the life of David from the Old Testament and passages worked from the dictionary. The novel is organized into three levels of units: each paragraph is separated from the others as if they were stanzas, these are in turn grouped into sections (marked by centered asterisks) determined by the given page of the dictionary from which Zukofsky is composing (29 in all), and finally these sections are distributed into a preface and five chapters, whose headings relate to the David story: "Young David," "Thru the Eyes of Jonathan," "David and Michal," "David and Bath-sheba," and "Degrees."<sup>4</sup> Throughout most of the work, the passages worked from the dictionary dominate, with the David strand sometimes obliquely framing the text, but often fading to little more than an occasional mention of proper names. However, in the final and longest chapter, "Degrees," the David narrative fully asserts itself and for half a dozen pages there is a straightforward presentation of the Old Testament story, albeit highly redacted and elliptical, but it would be assumed that this tale is already in the memory bank of most readers.

The method of composition is simple if unusual: Zukofsky chooses a given page of the dictionary and then improvisationally writes out of and with the textual materials on that page. This is not a rigorously constraining method as Zukofsky does not limit himself to rearranging words from a given page, but rather writes out of what was suggested by the words and definitions on a page, even if in most cases the majority of the words are directly quoted. The result is a highly unpredictable text heavily sprinkled with words, often quite odd or technical (scientific), beginning with the same letters. As is virtually always the case with Zukofsky's apparently more formalist compositions, he is never adverse to introducing irregularities, so here and there words/definitions from outside the chosen page are introduced into the composition—often, although not always, these can be accounted for by suggestions on the chosen page, since after all a dictionary is an intrinsically self-referential text. There are at least two instances where Zukofsky imports quoted text from outside but again suggested by the dictionary: an entry for the 17th century poet Sir William D'Avenant provokes the inclusion of some quoted lines from several of his poems, and some brief utopian quotations from Marx are apparently suggested by the word-definition for "eon"—however, such explicit interpolations of extra-dictionary texts are rare.

Two dictionaries were used, for the most part Funk & Wagnalls' *The Practical Standard Dictionary of the English Language* (1930), but also for six sections he used *Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* (3rd edition, 1916). Both are standard desk size volumes. As practical editions, there are no historical sample quotations, etymological information is very basic, and there are few notes on grammatical usage, although for certain words there are lists of synonyms with indications of their nuances and differences. There are a modest number of pictorial illustrations, of which Zukofsky occasionally made use. The surviving fair copy of the final version of *Thanks* is written in the small loose-leaf notebook pages Zukofsky habitually used through most of his life, which allowed him to reorder the sections as he liked. In the manuscript the 29 sections are numbered, which appears to

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3 For whatever reasons, *Thanks to the Dictionary* was not published until almost three decades after it was written in a collection of his short fiction, *It Was* (1961), as something of a follow-up to the Origin Press publication of "A" (1959). On the organized reaction against innovative modernism, see Alan Filreis, *Counter-Revolution of the Word: The Conservative Attack on Modern Poetry 1945-1960* (University of North Carolina Press, 2008).

4 I should mention that in a note to the typist on the fair copy of *Thanks* Zukofsky refers to "sections" and "parts" rather than my "chapters" and "sections," but this strikes me as liable to confusion (HRC 17.3).

indicate an earlier arrangement of the sections, although this may merely reflect the order in which they were composed. In any case this suggests that the individual sections were composed more or less discretely without conscious concern about the sequencing, which could be taken care of later. However, as I will discuss, the final sequencing does respect the chronology of the David narrative. Zukofsky appears to have worked on the novel intermittently from the summer of 1932 through 1934,<sup>5</sup> although the final arrangement was made or confirmed only in August 1939, and probably this was motivated by his proposal for a collection of critical prose that he hoped New Directions would publish.<sup>6</sup>

According to Peter Quartermain, Zukofsky primarily chose the pages by throwing dice, and indeed a key section quotes from the definition for "dice," which happens to be on the same page for the word "dictionary" (74).<sup>7</sup> But as Quartermain recognizes, this instance itself indicates that chance was not necessarily how Zukofsky chose pages, as is also suggested by the fact that the "Preface" uses the first page of the dictionary, and others use the pages with the definitions for "David" and "degree" (relating to the Psalms designated as "songs of degrees"), and even the likelihood that chance selected the pages with such key words as "mind" or "design" seems unlikely. In one instance Zukofsky responded to Pound's complaint that his writing lacked "flow" by working a section from the dictionary page with that term. Zukofsky no doubt was happy to accept the allusion to Mallarmé in "dice," and align himself with a poetic practice that accepts risk, an exploratory mode without the promise of certainty or end. However, it is likely that Zukofsky chose pages by a combination of selected key words and randomly opening the volume or letting it fall open in the manner of *sortes Vigilanae*, as the text also seems to suggest: "the page by the hand opening that book will be cast" (284)<sup>8</sup>—although this could just as easily be understood as referring to the chance inherent in any reader picking up a book and turning to a page. In the end it does not much matter how the pages were chosen since what Zukofsky was taking advantage of was the objective or contingent diversity offered by any page of his source text rather than of any chance procedure for choosing them—that is, any given page of the dictionary already incorporates a high level of contingency by definition, which was all he needed.

Zukofsky does not consult his dictionaries in composing *Thanks* but uses them as textual fodder. He makes no particular distinction between terms and their definitions, as they are equally available as textual matter, nor is it necessary to recoup the definitions of unfamiliar terms or to figure out the terms to which extracts from definitions refer. While it is frequently amusing to recover the actual dictionary pages that reveal generative clues to Zukofsky's compositional process, this can become a pedant's game if taken as a key to the supposed hidden meaning of the

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5 Peter Quartermain, "Writing and Authority in Zukofsky's *Thanks to the Dictionary*" in *Stubborn Poetics: Poetic Facticity and the Avant-Garde* (2013): 73.

6 The fair copy of *Thanks* is dated in Zukofsky's hand 16 August 1939, with some instructions to the typist about layout. One instruction that has not been followed in the printings of *Thanks* is that each chapter begin on a new page. The chapter titles were quite clearly added later, and one can surmise this was done when the sequencing was decided. The proposed collection for New Directions was to be entitled, *Sincerity and Objectification*, and the table of contents includes *Thanks to the Dictionary*, although separated from the other critical essays proper. Two typescripts dated 1939 are held at the HRC (HRC 16.2 & 3). On this proposed volume, see *WCW/LZ* 275.

7 It is not obvious how one would use dice to determine page numbers that range up to four digits, although certainly possible, but there seems no reason to assume the use of dice simply on the basis that they are referred to in the text.

8 The Dalkey Archive edition of Zukofsky's *Collected Fiction* is available in two distinct printings, which effects the pagination of *Thanks*. Unfortunately there is no indication in the second printing (1997) that the volume has been reset or even the date of the new printing. In this commentary I will reference this latter printing, which has a predominately black cover with a reduced and cropped photo of Zukofsky, whereas the earlier printing (1990) uses the same photo for the full front cover.

text.<sup>9</sup> The title overtly points out its indebtedness to the dictionary, but Zukofsky easily could have, for example, indicated the range of dictionary terms for any given section, particularly given how much dictionaries cannibalize each other. But the entire presentation of the text works against such definition. If we habitually go to the dictionary to nail down meanings of given words, *Thanks* unfastens terms and their meanings into the larger world of words and their interrelations infinitely expanding and transmutating. If there is no distinction between the terms and definitions simply as textual material, nevertheless the interplay between terms (usually readily identifiable in a given section by the prominence of words beginning with the same letters) and definitions that may or may not match and that may or may not be familiar to us is central to the dynamic of the text as gesturing at this world where words point to words that are never fixed.

## II - Reading

Simply in terms of Zukofsky thinking about the possibilities implied by "Objectivist" poetics, the compositional method of *Thanks* throws attention onto the textual material and away from an expressive model whereby the author looks to his thoughts or feelings as the source of creative objectification. Presumably this is the ironic point of the epigraph: "*And what will the writers do then, poor things*" (265).<sup>10</sup> Composition is a matter of arranging and interrelating the linguistic material rather than assuming the words point to something (e.g. definitions) behind them—a more constructivist conception of the writer, rather than a purveyor of profundities. This is not to say that intention is eliminated, since what Zukofsky does with the materials on those pages is very much determined by his own interests and are clearly shaped, not simply collaged textual fragments (proto-cut-up). Nonetheless, the words as such are foregrounded, most obviously by the recurrence of unusual vocabulary that begins with the same letters, the often abrupt syntax and by the rapid unpredictable redirecting of the text within and between sentences. At the same time the individual paragraphs are rhetorically fashioned, ranging from exclamation to cool scientific description, and the sentences are for the most part grammatically standard although the semantic axis of selection seems anarchic—in other words, formally correct nonsense. The dictionary is an obvious, indeed ideal text for this purpose, since it represents an objectification of discourse, a decomposition of discourse into its basic particles rigorously organized according to an arbitrary schema, even though the order of the alphabet has, for literate readers, the feel of inevitability, the immanent presence of social and cultural orders. We might recall that Zukofsky had a significant hand in William Carlos Williams' essay on Gertrude Stein that argues her primary achievement is to strip words of their accumulated associations and syntactical mannerisms so that they can be used anew.<sup>11</sup> However, Zukofsky is not simply using the dictionary for vocabulary in the sense of a word list, as the phrases and sentences of the definitions play an equally prominent part in his composition. So it is more a matter of the page offering textual matter in a form that is highly decomposed in the sense that it is intrinsically full of gaps or disjunctions; or, one might say that the textual matter is offered in an already quasi-collaged state, which can then be re-worked.

Another advantage of using the dictionary was that its systematized arbitrariness means it guarantees a catholic scope of references on any given page, from scientific and technical terms to the colloquial and slang, the obsolete to the contemporary. This then becomes a means of

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- 9 For a reading of *Thanks* as a hermetic text whose secrets require an academic sleuth armed with the correct dictionaries and, ideally, digitized for easy searching, see Craig Dworkin, *Dictionary Poetics: Toward a Radical Lexicography* (Fordham UP, 2020): 33-47. For the identification and images of all the dictionary pages Zukofsky used, see the Z-site annotations for *Thanks*.
- 10 The fair copy attributes this epigraph to "J.R.," Zukofsky's best friend at the time, Jerry Reisman, who had a hand in a number of Zukofsky more adventurous works of the period, most notably the mathematical formula used in the first half of "A"-9.
- 11 William Carlos Williams, "The Work of Gertrude Stein" (1930) in *Imaginations* (New Directions, 1970): 344-351. On Zukofsky's feedback on this essay, see *WCW/LZ* 38-43, 48-50; he was apparently responsible for the inclusion of the quotations from *Tristram Shandy*.

overcoming the self-censorship integral to any genre or style of writing, or even of one's own ignorance. In a sense, within the dictionary nothing is unknown and on the level of vocabulary all aspects of a language are included. Although the lure of working with chosen key terms was irresistible, any given page of the dictionary would serve Zukofsky's purpose and supply a sufficient range of terms to implicate the larger world of language, much if not most beyond the competence of any given reader or writer. If the dictionary is intrinsically self-referential and therefore tautological, any meanings we know imbricate with unfathomable meanings we do not know and are largely unaware of.

The central concern of *Thanks*, however, is less composition as such than questions of reading, although with Zukofsky writing is always self-consciously re-writing and therefore the act of reading is implicated in any case. As with any innovative modernist writing or work of art, the reader is posed with obstacles and unreadability that nonetheless imply the text needs to be read differently. One section of *Thanks* highlights the term "design" in the form of a comical dialogue with one voice demanding a design and the other asking why? "Does the Mississippi want a design?" (283). We get to "Mississippi" from "De Soto, Hernandez" on the same page of the dictionary as "design." In the spirit of this text, the Mississippi here both desires and lacks a design, or does it? We might recall Heraclitus on the problem of defining rivers, or in this case texts. But "—Even the desperato wants a design! / —O! It is argued that the marks of design in nature prove it the work of a great Designer!" Zukofsky's dictionary neatly gets to the heart of the matter with the world conceived as a text written and underwritten by God. But fortunately or unfortunately the dictionary can always be relied upon to dissolve or disseminate any such metaphysical solutions with a string of synonyms, words that are not quite equal: "—Aim, cause, end, idea, model, project, purpose, reason, the families of minute, bright-green, unicellular, mainly solitary, fresh-water algae [...]." The text's trajectory here is from abstractions to a particular of nature, a turn away from habits of seeking grand design and meaning to close description or attention. No doubt it is not by chance that the organic wholeness suggested by "families" dissolves into their "minute" members and that these particulars are primary building blocks of nature or life itself. So, does one design up or down? This dialogue concludes: "—Hey! this novel wants a design! / —Okay!—says David—you find it!" The appearance of "David" suggests this name is a mark or figure for the author or for the text itself, giving the reader free license. The design is what the reader finds in or makes of it—to a degree.

Immediately before this conclusion a paragraph intrudes and interrupts the dialogue:

*Intent* and *purpose* overleap all particulars and fasten on the *end itself*. But David is distinguishable, and, even beyond this end. Desire has a wide range, from the highest objects to the lowest; desire is for an object near at hand, or near in thought and viewed as attainable; a wish may be for what is remote or uncertain; or even for what is recognized as impossible. (283)<sup>12</sup>

This can be read as a précis of the "argument" of *Bottom* some twenty years later: intention and purpose (mind) tend to overlook or repress particulars and become fixed ("fasten") on the end (an abstraction); desire (love, eyes) focuses on sensual particulars, what is at hand and in the world, whereas wishes (mind) reach beyond the obtainable or possible. This paragraph, other than the phrase mentioning David, is entirely extracted from the dictionary entries for "design" and "desire," or more precisely from the distinctions between possible synonyms for these two terms. The applicability of this paragraph to *Thanks* or to modernist works in general is obvious and explains why the text constantly short-circuits the reader's habitual urge to leap to an end or definition rather than wander among and mull over the particulars of the manifest text. Here, "David" might be taken as the meaning or lure of the text, which is distinguishable, legible but also distinct from other

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12 The printed texts have a key typo: "overlap" should be "overleap" (Quartermain 86). The latter reading is confirmed by both the dictionary and the surviving fair copy. However, "overlap" has its own suggestiveness.

particulars and possible meanings—he/it is beyond the "end itself" scattered because interrelated with any number of other words and their collocations. This at least is one way to understand the following gloss on "David" in the "Preface":

David, then, on his page, not like a slab forming the top of a capital, but not unlike an abacus, a reckoning table telling its sums will embrace all the words of this novel. For, David, anticipated, appears when the groundhogs are not in Abad. Abad is any cultivated city. But David who resists all its agents is free from iridescence, and without accidentals. If there is iridescence, it will be at his toes. His name, these words till now, are almost his story. (265)

We can easily enough read this as a reflection on, even a species of instructions for reading the novel that follows and the function of "David" as a shifting signifier. The text then as something like a reckoning table, shuffling basic units or marks to come up with sums that are in turn always open to further permutations. "David" as the sum or sense of the text is anticipated by the reader who "David" nonetheless resists, particularly in the sense of "David" as an absolute reading, "without accidentals" (or should we read "without" here as meaning outside or beyond?). Indeed, the signifier "David" often appears to designate and slid between the author, the text and the reader: "[...] as an author, David ventured [...]" (267), "[...] David differentiates and abstracts" (268), "[...] David interprets falsely, distrusts and suspects" (269), "[...] David disguised, betokening a hidden meaning, and emblematically seeking his man [...]" (270) and so on.

However, since words are defined by words it is not a matter of choosing or preferring "particulars" (as a word, an abstraction) over "intention" or "ends" but rather of maintaining the sense of dialectical play, the activity of words mutually defining themselves as this defining necessarily constantly shifts with recontextualization, the principle of iteration. In other words, an awareness of the act of reading, of reading as an action.

The opening section of the chapter "Degrees" begins "Thanks to the dictionary [...]," signaling that it may offer help, and indeed it works from the page with the term "dictionary," as well as the word "dice." "Dice" does not occur but its definition appears explicitly as an allegory for words themselves:

[...] the print lie like cubes of bone or ivory marked on every side, with, from one to six spots. (More!) As against any dictator, dicast or reader, that modern juryman with functions of a judge, the words, single pulse-beats to each systole of the heart will command for two heads [...]. (284).

This segment of text draws on the words/definitions for "dice," "dictator," "dicast" (in ancient Athens a citizen selected to sit in the law-courts "resembling a modern juryman, with functions of a judge"), "dicrotism" ("abnormal pulse-beating, showing a double pulse-beat to each systole of the heart"), "dictate" ("command") and "dicephalous" ("having two heads").<sup>13</sup> The words "lie" like dice being multi-faceted, polysemous and multi-relational, but the reader as dictator commands that the chance possibilities of a die cast are reduced to a final judgment or accounting, a reading in which each word has a single pulse-beat and will arbitrarily dictate for any two heads (at least) that are necessarily implied by any speech or reading act. A fairly clear statement of intent that this text sets itself against normalized reading habits. That there are other ways to "dictate" and tame this passage is obviously part of the game. Nevertheless, one might protest that Zukofsky is too readily giving the game away here and risks falling into dictating his text's intention, but the sentence continues at some length:

[...] like diazins their own cyclic class of compounds, their rings, that hold up, composed of their own atoms: Dicentra; low, delicate perennial herbs, racemes of nodding rose-colored or yellow heart-shaped flowers, the bleeding heart is well-known; doubly refracting crystals exhibiting different colors when viewed in different directions; solutions variously colored by different degrees of concentration; dicasts unaffected by

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13 Funk & Wagnalls' *The Practical Standard Dictionary of the English Language* (1924): 327.

blue-green- or redblindness; Dick, bunting; dicky, bib or a small bird; dicotyledons; dibasic, no dicker, on page 327, Dickson City a borough in East Pennsylvania; on page 303, the hand has turned back, there is David.

—and so the section finally ends. This adds the words/definitions for "diazin," "Dicentra," "dichroism," "dichromate," "Dick," "dickey," "dicotyledon," "dibasic," "dicker," "Dickson City." It is not important to sort all this out and to know the definitions of what are for most of us fairly esoteric words, although the simple point of our considerable ignorance is not the least significance here—the world of words and the world they inhabit should temper any given reader's dictatorial propensities, should counter the intimidatingly authoritative purposes to which dictionaries are often used. On one level, there is an accumulation of allegorical images which can be applied to our understanding of words: cycles, compounds, rings, composition, scale (low), refracting crystals, directions, solutions and so on, can all be applied easily enough back on our words as dice so that there is a persistent shifting in how we might model the relations that words imply and that words impose. Most of us who are not keen gardeners may not know "Dicentra" nor recognize that its definition follows immediately, "low, delicate perennial herbs . . . the bleeding heart." Indeed, here Zukofsky has gone out of his way to separate via punctuation the word and its definition and to suggest the word is more closely related to what precedes, from the definition for "diazin" (the semi-colon is the most ubiquitous punctuation mark in the dictionary Zukofsky uses, although not between terms and their definitions). However, by throwing the reader's attention onto the word "Dicentra" itself one can readily read it off etymologically as meaning two-centered, which is another plausible image of this text where any here also points there, and of course throughout this section there is the etymological play on *di-* meaning two and *dic(o)-* meaning say.<sup>14</sup> By the end of the sentence we are getting close to a mere list of words which however are related by sound patterns (di-, b- and -ck sounds), an almost childlike delight of the words in the mouth and ear, which is another way they can relate and mean—a more visceral play with words that could be taken as intrinsic to the poetic impulse itself. And then an overt reference to the page of the dictionary being used and an apparently arbitrary jump to page 303, which happens to be the page with the entry for "David" used for the immediately following section, beginning "Dates! dates! dates! the oblong, sweet, fleshy fruit!...", which in turn will be followed by the Biblical account of David's life. In a sense that we will examine more closely in a moment, "David" is the ever-elusive definition this text seeks, the meaning towards which all the other words and definitions point and disperse.

If the dictionary serves Zukofsky as ideal textual fodder in a quasi-cleansed state, his treatment of this textual material surely implies a certain critique of the socio-political function of dictionaries. While for the most part English has not suffered the sort of policing imposed on French by the French Academy or even by a state-backed dictionary like the Duden for "standard" German, dictionaries obviously play an influential standardizing role in terms of spelling and definitions, even when, as has been increasingly the case over recent times, they adopt a descriptive rather than prescriptive policy and are receptive to the vagaries of common usage. Dictionaries are the direct product of and instruments in modernity's insatiable appetite for standardization and classification, repressing dialects and asserting "national" languages ("... with an army and navy"). Dictionaries, like reference works generally, present themselves by their nature as authoritative and definitive. But for Zukofsky dictionaries foreground that words are intrinsically tautological, words simply lead to more words, one definition leading to others indefinitely. Reconstituting the dictionary used as the spring-board for *Thanks* is of little importance and if pursued too programmatically misses the generative intent of this text. Reading does not require that we put back together the terms and their definitions, whether or not they both appear in the text, even though our awareness of terms

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14 Actually, etymologically *dicentra* means two-spurred or two-pointed (< Gr. *dikentros*, with two points), referring to the bleeding heart's spurred corolla. But scholarly correctness is of little authority in Zukofsky's word world.

and their definitions, sometimes attachable but often not, is integral to the effect of this text — we are half-aware that our word-knowledge occupies a small percentage of the possible totality or that what we "know" is constantly corrected, augmented, even lost. We live among unknown words, half-known words and wrongly known words all the time. Reading is a key site of socialization and state policing, but therefore also of critique and insight. One effect of Zukofsky's handling of the dictionary is to detach terms from their definitions, or to change the relationship between them from an equals sign to a more sceptically dialectical relationship that folds them back into the larger word-world. Not infrequently Zukofsky is attracted to the appended sections on synonyms for key words, whose attempt to define the nuanced differences in usage between them reveals an unclosed definitional field. So, for example, under "design" we have as mentioned: aim, device, end, final cause, intent, intention, object, plan, project, proposal, purpose, scheme, with model and reason also referred to; or on the same page for "desire" there are the synonyms: inclination, craving, hankering, longing, appetite, coveting (Funk & Wagnalls 327). These make for fascinating reading in the interplay between sameness and difference that is at the heart of Zukofsky's text.

### III - Narrative

So far in this discussion of *Thanks* the David text-strand seems largely superfluous, which is how it has been treated by the modest number of critical examinations this work has attracted.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless *Thanks* clearly works with and against an assumption of narrative, a principle of sequential organization. The chapter headings set an expectation of an underlying narrative order, roughly signaling the main phases of David's life: his youth culminating in the combat with Goliath ("Young David"), the cat and mouse period due to Saul's paranoia which is marked by the pact of loyalty between David and Jonathan ("Thru the Eyes of Jonathan"), David's kingship during which many of the complications and moral failings are related to his two main wives, who themselves represent in so many respects an antithetical pair ("David and Michel" and "David and Bathsheba"), and then finally "Degrees" points to David as psalmist as well as to any number of other senses this term may take on. However, the reader is set on this path only to be persistently turned aside into seemingly unrelated byways. Recalling the passage on overleaping particulars discussed above, we recognize a conventional definition of narrative: a teleological end retrospectively sorts out and organizes the messy events and details of history or the innumerable possible paths a text might take.

The first chapter immediately establishes a narrative setting, offering a sketch of young David standing by a water-raising wheel ("sakkiyek") with a prickly-pear cactus. But this remains a tableau, returned to but never moving forward. David apparently works but nothing happens, seemingly just turning in place. But verbally plenty happens as diverse possibilities from the dictionary are set in play as if irrigating or irrigated by David's work at the water-wheel. The static image of David turning in place is a suggestive but non-dictating space around which the other verbal actions are distributed—a spatialization of the textual activity that deflects away from temporal narrative sequencing. Perhaps the rather odd reiterated detail of the prickly-pear is a covert warning to the reader. However, the third paragraph includes a somewhat surreal summary of David's later life, particularly its sad conclusion and the death of Absalom, presented as if David sees his life complete when it is only just beginning. Again, this is a common conception of a proper narrative, its end is its beginning, rather like the definition interpolated at this point: "—in a series of organic isomers designating a compound to which the chain is continuous and not branched, [...]"

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15 Beside Quartermain and Dworkin previously mentioned, further commentary on *Thanks* can be found in a short but astute discussion by Bruce Comens, *Apocalypse and After: Modern Strategy and Postmodern Tactics in Pound, Williams and Zukofsky* (1995): 148-151; Nicholas Sloboda, "Introducing the Ludic: The Poetics of Play in Louis Zukofsky's Fiction," *English Studies in Canada* 23.2 (June 1997): 201-215 and, briefly, Barrett Watten, "New Meaning and Poetic Vocabulary: From Coleridge to Jackson Mac Low," *The Constructivist Moment: From Material Text to Cultural Poetics* (2003): 25-27.

(267). The missing term for this definition is "normal (*Chem.*)," which we hardly need to recover to understand the point. *Thanks*, however, will discontinuously branch all too often.

The next section appears more narratively promising as David loads up a cart with provisions for his brothers at the war front, which as we know will lead to David's encounter with Goliath. Unfortunately his cart (a "spider") gets stuck in the mud, like the reader entangled in this text. David gets down to examine the wheel, displaced from the previous water-wheel, and the text circles around its parts—the rim, the tire, the spokes, the hub, the axle-nut—each a point for variations on "fluctuate": hesitation, vacillation, wavering between, as the reader attempts to negotiate the text, in contrast to "flowing" or "a copious outpouring, also gentle movement as of speech" (among other definitions) (268). This is not to be an eloquent or comfortable reading text. If the wheel promises smooth forward movement, here it becomes stuck in textual mud, forcing the reader to readjust, to read the wheel differently, considering its parts as a functioning contraption, as a metaphor for multi-directionality. In any case, a reading that persistently reflects on itself: what in fact are we doing in reading and what are this action's consequences? The inertia of the narrative redirects attention to the dynamics of the text, the act of reading itself.

As mentioned, this passage also responds to Pound's complaint, on reading an extract of *The Writing of Guillaume Apollinaire*, that Zukofsky needed to study the "technique of FLOW." The latter also replied more directly and bluntly that such a conception of stylistic flow was "archaic," and that Pound's "criticism has made clear once and for all my fear of gliding—the possibility of being left with air forever and continued cradling" (*EP/LZ* 137-138).<sup>16</sup> While this might be brushed off as the pose of youthful or Oedipal avant-gardism, it indicates a quite self-conscious rejection of stylistic felicity very evident in *Thanks*, a distrust of rhetorical homogeneity and seduction. More specifically Zukofsky's focus is on the textual responsibility of provoking rather than subduing the reader. While the *Cantos* stand as a major work of modernist poetic collage there is nevertheless a strong propensity toward a stylistic homogeneity and rhetorical assertion that Zukofsky will resist in his own writing.<sup>17</sup> The linguistic heterogeneity of *Thanks* and Zukofsky's work generally brushes this hybridity up against itself.

Wherever the David narrative appears as more than a mere passing name, we find this freezing of the narrative as the text turns away to other possibilities. The extent to which the narrative asserts itself varies considerably from chapter to chapter. In the nine sections of "Thru the Eyes of Jonathan" (5 pages), there are only a couple passing mentions of the name "David" and one of "Jonathan" with no further discernible relation to the action or details of the Biblical account. Perhaps this textually mimics the narrative phase when David is an outlaw and often in hiding. In contrast, "David and Bath-sheba," for all its textual swerving, quite clearly evokes the Biblical context: the first section a monologue of seduction addressed by David to Bath-sheba, the second a dialogue between the two on Bath-sheba's husband Uriah the Hittite (here called Uriah Miltiades, as suggested by the relevant dictionary page), who David has expediently done away with, and then a section in the form of a monologue by Bath-sheba on the moral quandary in which she finds herself. The latter begins:

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16 Most readers would probably agree with Pound about the style of the Apollinaire book, which already manifests the dialectical manner Zukofsky will perfect, to the annoyance of many, in *Bottom*. His response to Pound at least confirms that he was quite aware of the effect of his critical prose and self-consciously frustrated the usual expectations of such discourse.

17 The dedication to Pound in *An "Objectivists" Anthology*, which Zukofsky frequently insisted was as much a critique as an homage, points out precisely a conservative propensity and homogenization in the form of Pound's lines, maintaining a rhetorical use of phrasing and length. The dedication has an epigraph: "And that was the revolution . . . / as soon as they named it," which of course quotes Pound himself (Canto 16) on the Bolshevik Revolution, but here slyly turned back against him. As Pound indicates via Lincoln Steffens, the Russian Revolution was inevitably a haphazard and messy affair which only retrospectively is neaten up into a narrative and given a proper name. The case is of course the same for poetic revolutions and the dangers that ensue on their naming and success.

His, the attribute of the subject, Lent goes, and I am still Astarte, female of forbidden divinity to all our known friends, David's, on the squared stone of his mason-work. Thru all this season of penitence I have been able to look with a side glance. It is really that not on a vessel nor at sea, I am his largest continent of the world. Fault to him means nothing, nor to me [...]." (281-282)

This general manner with a recognizable speaking "I" is maintained throughout most of the section, but with the interference of seemingly incongruous interpolations or semantic misdirections against the expectations of the syntax, although in this case we can bend the pieces to fit the scenario. There is little difficulty and a good deal of suggestiveness in taking Bath-sheba as a manifestation of Astarte (from the entry for "Ashtoreth," the Hebrew designation for this goddess), who here is comically feeling repentant (in a Lent mood), presumably due to David's disposal of her husband and adding her to his harem, which may leave her feeling at sea but then again steadied by David's encomium (in the style of the first section of the chapter) that she is "his continent of the world" (i.e. "Asia"), as well as the fact that she is sitting firmly on "the ashlar of his roof" (281), and so if he feels there is no fault then why should she? Although the pre-given Biblical narrative rises, so to speak, to help frame the textual anarchy, it still cannot shake off an awkward self-consciousness in doing so. The above quotation immediately gives us a grammatical gloss on "His" reminding us that it is after all a verbal construct, although with real consequences since Bath-sheba's dilemma is precisely whose "his" she is, and in either case she is reduced to an "attribute" as a subject and/or wife. In such sections the reader is forced to flip back and forth between the expected frame and the effort to accommodate the verbal particulars. In this case, the overt presence of the dictionary, normally signaled by the repeated occurrence of same-starting words, is relatively subdued. Elsewhere no such relation to the implied narrative is detectable, and the reader is left with a bemused expectation or simply forgets about the narrative altogether, although Zukofsky tends to throw in hints, primarily in the form of dropping David's name, as a persistent tease: where or who is "David"?

While the individual sections and paragraphs are clearly shaped, this only highlights their inconsistency, their refusal of any rhetorical or stylistic coherence. Again, the use of the dictionary is helpful in resisting the learned propensity toward discursive homogeneity or flow (aka Freshman English). *Thanks* compels the reader to constantly readjust, to start again. In this Zukofsky may have taken a clue from *Ulysses* in which the nominal narrative cohesion of Bloom's and Daedalus' wanderings are countered and often dissolved by the formal discreteness of the individual chapters which have their own logics. In *Thanks*, as elsewhere in Zukofsky's work, the reader's attention is not only disrupted in its attempts to anticipate habitual structures that are supposedly determined by intentions or ends, but is focused on the immediate complexities, on words and their contexts and relations, a reading more dialectical and errantly circular than linear. As such the David narrative appears to function primarily in its absence, as an expectation of narrative order that is raised to self-consciousness by its failure to perform. *Thanks* is a spatialized text going in all directions or crisscrossing itself, which its overt collaged presentation highlights.

Zukofsky's choice of a Biblical narrative, as opposed to, say, something Homeric, references the single most pervasive and authoritative text that claims to underwrite post-classical Western culture and give it coherence. As such it has long been the primary testing ground for theories of reading and textual interpretation. David is the prototypical poet-king and his story highlights the specifically Judaic strand as well as being within the Bible an unusually well-sustained narrative, full of incident and moral ambiguities. It may not be irrelevant that Charles Reznikoff had been making his own loosely versified versions of segments from the Old Testament, among which "King David" is prominent.<sup>18</sup> In one sense, Zukofsky sets the Bible and the dictionary in contentious dialogue, which we might understand as the desacralization of Western culture wherein the

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18 Charles Reznikoff, "'Editing and Glosses' from *By the Waters of Manhattan: An Annual 1929*" in *The Complete Poems of Charles Reznikoff*, Vol. 1, ed. Seamus Cooney (Black Sparrow Press, 1978): 75-103.

dictionary becomes the modern Bible or its substitute, a purely analytical, "objectivist" text that studiously rejects mythopoetics or any grand narrative. Yet if the dictionary represents a thorough secularization of the text, it nevertheless maintains its own well-nigh mythic authority. This is surely a clue to reading *Thanks*, which deliberately sets in play a culturally authoritative narrative and its desacralization without devolving into a static dualism, but would enhance a renewal (recontextualization) of an all too familiar story.

However, the overt insertion of a such a primary ur-narrative into *Thanks* inevitably signifies a long cultural history and specifically its interpretive weight. Whether consciously or not, King David spontaneously evokes in any reader various levels of interpretive reading or allegory: the subjective (moral or psychological), the historical or national, or the anagogical, projecting beyond history to desired possibilities of alternative community. If the Bible can no longer serve as a standard of knowledge or moral instruction, then its interpretive history—multitudinous, contradictory, endlessly generative—is nonetheless exemplary if brought to reading consciousness. In this sense *Thanks's* perspective on the Bible is simultaneously reverent and impertinent, rather like the Zukofskys' take in *Catullus* on the Latin original. This follows from Zukofsky's "objectivist" perspective on language generally: the objective recognition that all styles or discourses are historical and ideological, none are transparent or can be singled out as the ground or standard by which to critique all others.

The reader may greet the introduction of the straight retelling of the David narrative late in *Thanks* with either relief or a decided sense of anti-climax. We already know the story of David, we already know all the stories, so why retell it yet again. Zukofsky's version interpolated into the middle of "Degrees" is taken verbatim without rearrangement from the King James version, only radically abbreviated to six pages, as if to say to the readers: if you want your story, well here it is. But in doing so he foregrounds the question of the relation between this story and the rest of *Thanks*. In abridging the text, Zukofsky introduces frequent blank spaces into the account.<sup>19</sup> Zukofsky apparently suggested these gaps mark divisions between episodes (Quartermain 75), although this does not appear obviously the case, and in the event they have the effect of indicating the gaps and missing pieces in any narrative. Eric Auerbach famously pointed out that Old Testament narrative (in contrast to Homeric narrative) is characterized by its lack of explanations or causal links, actions are merely related, which has the paradoxical effect of making the narrative more psychologically complex and mysterious, and this observation reminds us of the fractured nature of narrative's efforts at presenting a seamless whole.<sup>20</sup> With Old Testament historical narratives we tend to feel we are missing key elements, especially explanations of motivation, and at the same time become distracted by seemingly disconnected details or confused by the imperfect splicing together of different narrative sources (these distinct traditions remain evident in Zukofsky's abridgment). The blanks in Zukofsky's digest suggest not only what has been left out but what might be put in, how the narrative opens out in any number of directions, that is, to words, just as a dictionary can lead from one word-definition to another indefinitely.

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19 Quartermain points out (85) there are some problems with the presentation of this segment in current printings. He observes that the text breaks on page 286 are not authorized and that, aside from the final two paragraphs, the David narrative taken from the Old Testament should be read as one continuous block without any paragraph breaks. This is correct based on the surviving fair copy (HRC 17.3), to which he is referring and which has clear textual notes. However, the current text is apparently based on typescript prepared in 1939 as part of an unpublished selection of critical essays, probably via the 1961 Origin Press publication in *It Was*, although I have not been able to confirm this. The 1939 typescript has the breaks on page 286, except that the short paragraph beginning, "And he went, striped off his clothes..." is also set off from the preceding paragraph. It is worth noting that except where there is a line break between paragraphs, there are no further indentations, although this can confuse readerly habits where a sentence ends flush right and is followed by a blank flush left, but this is a gap not a paragraph break.

20 Eric Auerbach, *Mimesis*, "Odysseus' Scar."

Zukofsky overtly frames David's narrative in an intriguingly suggestive manner. The opening paragraph of the section begins with the usual textual high jinks but soon segues into the narrative proper with the lead-in: "Knowledge is but Sorrow's spy. The lark takes this window for the east: [...]" (284-285). This does not sound like the dictionary and is not, but rather a couple of lines by the poet William Davenant (or D'Avenant), whose entry appears on the relevant dictionary page as "(1601-1668). An English poet laureate" (Funk & Wagnalls 303). Davenant's name is not mentioned in *Thanks* and his identity is not particularly important, but these lines represent an infrequent importation of non-dictionary texts into *Thanks*. The line, "Knowledge is but Sorrow's spy," is repeated as a frame or refrain on the other side of David's narrative six pages later along with further lines from Davenant poems. We might surmise that the appearance of a poet on the same page of the dictionary as the definition for "David" is excuse enough to interpolate some lyrical lines as an entry and exit for the narrative of David, who after all is the prototype of the poet-king. But beyond this bit of allusive wit, if we look more closely at "Knowledge is but Sorrow's spy," despite its modest fame the line is by no means transparent in meaning. Furthermore, Zukofsky throws in another wrinkle by highlighting a couple appearances of the word "spies" that show up in King James version of David's narrative—in both instances the word is notably isolated on its own (287, 289). Usually Davenant's line is glossed as roughly meaning "ignorance is bliss" read through a Christian filter, which is hard to argue with but perhaps not terribly helpful in the present context. Surely much of the line's appeal is its enigmatic suggestiveness. If referring to the dictionary then knowledge in the sense of definiteness indicates a narrow and conspiratorial knowledge. Spies represent the more repressive instruments of state power or ideological control, although "Sorrow's spy" seems to suggest a self-repression or control mechanism, such as conventional habits of reading or deference to the dictionary. The underlining of "spies" in his version of the Biblical account might very well implicate the reader whose knowledge, a head full of preconceived ideas, polices the textual possibilities. Again, if Zukofsky is concerned with the prospects for an innovative and progressive writing, then he must address the problems of reading itself and the forces that would limit its potentialities. The additional line from Davenant, "The lark takes this window for the east," is similarly ambiguous: a conventional promise of utopian hopes which the lark famously greets or the lark is trapped within the framework of "this" window and therefore takes any light as the east or dawn. If this "window" is the narrative of David that immediately follows (and the quotation ends with a colon), then we might take this as a view that offers a false east, simply the same story or knowledge that we already know—like the cliché of larks greeting the morning. But Zukofsky will punch holes in this narrative, which perhaps offer a chance for more or other light.

When the "sorrow's spy" line is repeated (with "sorrow" now de-capitalized) immediately following the tale of David, we are given some additional lines:

Wake all the dead! What ho! What ho! How soundly they sleep on the decks of the world  
in storms of love. You, that are more than our discreeter fear, Leaves scarce reach green,  
As if the silver planet, In this small lanthorn, would contract her light, and to implore  
your light, he sings. (290-291)

This collages miscellaneous lines and phrases from three different poems by Davenant (a practice Zukofsky will use extensively in late movements of "A"). These sleeping dead could be understood as readers yet to awake to the possibilities offered by such a text as *Thanks*, which calls out to them. In this case the lark's presence and implied greeting of the morning takes on a more positive spin. In the course of retelling David's narrative, we have moved from the morning (perhaps false) to night. Generally Zukofsky is more a sun than a moon guy—the sun reveals the multiplicity of the particulars of the world. But sitting or context determines meanings. Our poor lark appears trapped inside, in the mind that sees only light not things, and the insistence on too much reading light (clarity) is a narrow knowledge. But on the other side of David's story we are in the realm of the moon (refracted light) where sleepers sleep but also possibilities repressed in daylight creep out.

The final sentence ("As if the silver planet...") imagines the light of the moon (the repressed or latent) contracted into the lantern by which one reads the text that sings to draw out the reciprocal light of the reader. This is an interesting take on the refracted light of Zukofsky's "Objectivist" definition.

The political implications of this imagery or allegory are obvious enough, all the more so within the context of the times when sleepers or sleepwalkers were a ubiquitous figure for those attempting to ignore the social traumas unfolding in the early 1930s.<sup>21</sup> *Thanks* does not elaborate elsewhere on this sleeping image except in one pointed instance in "Young David" where Zukofsky interpolates a sentence that has no obvious relation to the dictionary page being worked with nor anything else in the section: "The sleepers continued seeing asleep, startled repeatedly by thoughts of rebellion" (270). Undoubtedly it is not happenstance that this concludes a section that works from the dictionary page including "labor." And the other non-dictionary text explicitly interpolated into *Thanks* is from Marx—again not named but in this case too familiar to be missed by most readers. The dictionary connection is apparently the term "eon" (and possibly "Eos," goddess of dawn, the next entry), which provokes snippets from Marx lyrically expressing the realization of the end of history: "[...] when 'twenty years are but as one day—' [and] 'the free development of each the condition for the free development of all'" (279). This entire paragraph is of considerable interest as Zukofsky speculates on the possibility of a utopian transformation of consciousness in reading or realizing a single word, as holding in a single awareness a cosmic perspective with the present moment, the personal with the communal:

It would seem for an incalculable period of time, at least, that the motions will not be that stringed instrument that gives forth musical sounds when exposed to a current of air. What then shall my life, as of nebulous matter rising and expanding as from the nucleus of a comet, on the side towards the sun, say to the sun every repeated morning? Maybe that unorganized compound of vegetable or animal origin that causes chemical transformation in the brain will entwine a word: see *eon* and present itself with the image of an age; look into the face of age and calculate an infinity. And eons, externalized, give shape to one's circumstances collectively [...].

Those acquainted with *Bottom* will recognize this speculative dialectical manner, simultaneously suggestive and elusive, resisting full conceptualization. Almost all the words of these sentences draw on the terms and definitions for: *eon*, *Eolian harp*, *envelope* (*Astron.*), *enzyme*, *entwine*, *envisage* and *environ*. Notably, this utopian paragraph counterpoints the other, preceding paragraph of the section, which is largely dominated by material from the entries for *envious* and *envy*. The quotations from Marx in *Thanks* could be understood as a description of the reading experience and its utopian impulse, in which it is possible to have a glimpsing sense of this dialectical intersection that brings together the cosmic or scientific perspective which dissolves the individual consciousness or moment into the totality with a subjective focus or sense of the moment. Reading, like dreaming, offers an obvious instance where we can have the sensation of reconfigured time that Marx imagines—a collective time where the inexorably march of individual mortality is recontextualized and redefined, awakening us in the reading to the possible, to alternatives to the given present. If there is a politics in *Thanks*, then surely it is in some such sense as this. This

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21 Sleepers in a clearly political sense appear significantly in Zukofsky's early work. A few quick examples: in "A"-1, via the libretto for Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*, there are sleeping disciples identified with weary laborers who ignore the impending disaster and may or may not wake up to the implied Resurrection ("A" 4); the title of Zukofsky's play, *Arise, Arise* (1936), alludes to this Christian eschatological context via both John Donne's Holy Sonnet 7 ("At the round earth's imagin'd corners, blow") and to *L'Internationale*—this work is a dream play that includes the violent death of a character during a general strike (off-stage) who comes back to life as if awakening from a long sleep; "A"-8 includes a lengthy passage from Marx on the "labor process" where things are "rouse[d ...] from their 'death-like' sleep. / Bathed in the fires of labor" ("A" 62)—of course this entire movement is framed as a hymn to light and labor or labor as light.

conjunction of sleep and politics indicates an analogical level of interpretation, in which the hopes inherent in new possibilities of reading and writing intersect with and participate in the latent collective dreams of the manifest historical movements of the day. Zukofsky would spend the 1930s attempting to develop a high modernist art relevant to a revolutionary oriented readership, who for the most part were not much interested. Again the comparison with Pound is instructive: it is not a matter of choosing Marx over Mussolini but rather the deployment of a radical formalism open to the not yet known over a modernized refurbishment of past social models.

Finally, "Degrees," the title of the final chapter, which includes the Biblical version of David's narrative, is worth a thought. The natural assumption is that this refers to the "Songs of Degrees," traditionally attributed to David, a set of Psalms to be sung while ascending the steps to the Temple. Zukofsky made various allusions in his work to this title, particularly in "A" (159, 171, 316) and as a group title of a set of poems in *Some Time* from the 1950s (CSP 145-152). There is, however, only passing reference to these or any other psalms in the main text of *Thanks* (275, 277), so its significance here remains speculative. The word is notably mathematical or objective in its implications, and if we apply it to questions of reading that I suggested are at the heart of *Thanks*, then "degrees" can be understood as an interrelated range of meanings or angles of view. If the Bible as *The Book* conventionally implies an absolute truth or knowledge that one must read for, despite the long history of contentiousness about just what that meaning must be, then via the dictionary *Thanks* suggests an alternative mode of reading wherein meaning is always a matter of relation and context and therefore a matter of degrees, comparative interrelationships. In this sense "degrees" might be taken as implying the transition to a secular regime of relative measures and relations.

#### IV - Definition

As we have seen, *Thanks* eschews the authority of the dictionary simply by reading it against the grain, that is quite literally—less a repository of established definitions or meanings than simply of words and textual snippets open to any number of arrangements. The work generates diverse readings, most obviously self-referential allegories of the text or its reading, and this self-consciousness tends to destabilize the integrity of discrete words as definitions. Or on the level of narrative, which can be thought of as an extended definition, *Thanks* gravitates against the trained injunction to read for maximum coherence: "meaning" as such is persistently set in play with its dissolution into moments of the present, which then can be recognized as opening to alternative collocations. The question of "definition" comes down to the problem of representation, that the very act of naming and therefore of language use generally inherently entails selection and abstraction from the inchoate complex that is the "real," whether we designate the latter as matter, history, experience, the libidinal (desire) or any number of other names. Since the writer cannot simply conjure away language's reifying propensities, Zukofsky saw his task as creating a self-reflective textual dynamic, a kinesthetic text.

In concluding his critical survey of "American Poetry 1920-1930," Zukofsky quotes a paragraph from the essay "Paper" by "Roger Kaigh" on this problem of representation:

Infinite shades of meaning cannot be recognized, for the instrument of formal logic depends upon static or categorical meanings, that is, definitions, for its operation. [...] But categories which appear distinct upon paper derive an infinity of variations in speech. [...] For the context, gesture, intonation and pronunciation give words a stamp of meaning which a written form will lack. (*Prep.* 147)<sup>22</sup>

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22 "Roger Kaigh" was Zukofsky's friend and Columbia classmate Irving Kaplan. Zukofsky circulated this essay among a number of his friend, and unsuccessfully tried to have it published. Its belated publication mistakenly appeared under Basil Bunting's name, since a copy was found among his papers and seemed to jive with his general views. Basil Bunting, *Three Essays* (Durham, UK: Basil Bunting Poetry Centre, 1994). For an extensive discussion of this erroneous attribution, see Andrew Crozier, "Paper Bunting,"

Although this is couched in the discourse of philosophical linguistics, Zukofsky's context is the defense of paper poets, such as himself, in other words of free verse, against the homogenizing forms of conventional verse: meter, poetic diction and rhetoric, thematic coherence. To counter these ossifying forces and recoup the possibilities for textual dynamicism, the spoken is evoked as the site of linguistic variation and innovation against "definition" as codified in dictionaries or the protocols of conventional poetry. Zukofsky is not inclined to advocate the spoken in terms of "voice" as a ground of "naturalness" or authenticity, and for the most part his work manifests an overt artifice unimaginable apart from the written. Zukofsky's emphasis on the aural is usually couched in musical terms (particularly Baroque music), that is, artifice, yet the spoken, with its implications of the performative and dialogic always remains fundamental in his writing. This perhaps manifests itself most explicitly and outrageously in *Catullus*, a work of high artifice that nonetheless grounds itself on pronunciation, on sounding and hearing possibilities, in large part between languages. *Catullus* is an inherently word-bending work. We should not discount the formative impact of growing up in the highly polyglot streets of New York City, by which I mean not so much that Zukofsky spoke Yiddish at home and English at school, but the entire babel of languages (predominately East European) of Chrystie Street in the Lower East Side a block or two from Little Italy and Chinatown.

However one chooses to explain it, what remains striking about the early Zukofsky is his self-conscious and adamant break with the cultural politics of the elder modernist poets—I primarily have in mind Eliot, Pound and Stevens. He did not see the crisis of the West as a matter of responding to a collapse of faith or social values that then must be recovered, remodeled or reinvented, which in turn justifies the aesthetic responses and social value of the poets themselves at a time when the historical conditions that defined their role appeared increasingly irrelevant. Rather, Zukofsky saw the crises of the day in terms of historical events and complexities that are not going to be fixed by resurrecting a blueprint based on reified simplifications (definitions) of the past. History and society are always in crisis, in other words, in complex change. Poetry's task and action is necessarily located in readers and reading, not in instructing them as to what they ought to think and do.

When Zukofsky launched at age 24 what appeared to be a typically grand modernist project with "A", he eschewed the mythopoetic under-structure that typically justifies the cultural and ethical intent of high modernist works. He simply proposed 24 parts to be written autonomously and gathered together on the assumption that they or the reader will inevitably find their interconnections.<sup>23</sup> But it is difficult to discern, especially in the movements from "A"-12 (1951) on, any definite thematic coherence within the individual movements, much less between them. The question remains open, deliberately so I want to argue, whether "A" is a single long poem or a collection of mostly longish, mostly discrete poems. The point is simply that Zukofsky is not thinking of aesthetic structure in conventional terms, and *Thanks* is an early example that manifests this rejection of narrative, or more precisely insists on putting narrative into critical self-reflection.

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*Sagetrieb* 14.3 (1995): 45-74.

23 Of course the number 24 is as archetypal a choice as one could wish for, signaling completeness and closure, as well as providing an array of symbolic associations. However, there is simply no relation between the hours of the day or natural cycles and the structure of the poem itself, other than the banal point, which Zukofsky was perfectly happy with, that the poem has something of the shape and rhythm of the life of the poet—although even that takes on a different complexion if we recognize that the poem is predominately constructed from reworking prior writings by others and "ends" with an arrangement by someone other than the individual designated on the title page. A number of different culturally significant textual models have been proposed as standing behind the number 24—the books of the Homeric epics, the books of the Hebrew Bible, the number of fugues in each book of Bach's *The Well-Tempered Clavier* (on each of the major and minor keys)—but without answering the question, so what?, since none of these textual models seems of much importance in the actual execution of the poem. For discussion of the form of "A", see Z-Notes commentaries on the Forms of "A" and on "A" 1-7.

The formal coherence of "A" is not a question to be critically debated in the manner commonly assumed in such cases as *The Cantos* or *The Bridge*, but rather is deliberately integrated into the structure of the text itself to be negotiated, realized or not in the act of reading, with and against expectations of such coherence. The performative present or moment of attention becomes the intersection of dialectical possibilities.

*Thanks* can be understood as a working out and trial run of these formal issues. In this light the incorporation of his divergence from Pound becomes all the more significant, the rejection of flow and all the conventional definitional implications such a formal assumption takes on. At the point Zukofsky worked on *Thanks*, he had completed "A" 1-7, which have a semblance of a narrative: a schematic autobiographical structure, however concerned not with character development but the search for an adequate form for the poem at hand, which is first realized in and as "A"-7, with its sonnets exploding into a dance of sawhorses that are words. Thereafter circumstances will determine the forms and concerns of the individual movements of "A", although arguably Zukofsky only begins to fully realize the formal implications of what he set in motion with "A"-12 and after, in which most of the movements are worked up from accumulations of randomly collected textual materials of all kinds.

In what he intended to be a major statement of poetics in the immediate aftermath of World War II, Zukofsky rejected the validity of mythic structures and that the current crisis was due to the collapse or lack of cultural myths to which the poet must respond. He finishes this sentence, famously, by advising the poet to give "some of his life to the use of the words *the* and *a*: both of which are weighted with as much epos and historical destiny as one man can perhaps resolve" (*Prep.* 10). This draws attention to the minimum and seemingly most insignificant particles of grammar, but is not a gesture of modesty since the point is that everything is related. This is a call for a heightened attention or reading that resists overleaping particulars, not least a constant attention to the words as such that are the poet's material, the text as object. "The" and "a" are not merely minimal linguistic particles each deserving greater respect but are an inseparable dialectical pair, mutually defining each other. Zukofsky's first major poem, "Poem beginning 'The,'" is autobiographical (we do not need to decide whether it has any reference to the "real" Zukofsky), a portrait of the poet as a young man, who in the course of the poem determines to leave behind the inherited limitations of the family, education, Jewishness, Yiddish and concludes with an ecstatic hymn to the sun expressing a desire to embrace "the myriad," that is, society and poetry at large. This is a movement from "the" to "a" (or from "son" to "sun") that entails a shift in the understanding of subjectivity in writing: "the" tends toward a static and discrete focus whereas "a" inherently implies others and is open-ended, a subjectivity constantly under construction or, echoing Williams, perpetually "beginning again"—which is what is implied by free verse, when all the inherited rules of order are thrown out.<sup>24</sup> But what we really have here are two terms set in active relation, and obviously the autobiographical remains very much in evidence throughout "A", so in that sense we have a redefining of or shifting "the." Zukofsky always insisted that the title of "A" was simply quoting the first word of the poem, echoing "Poem beginning 'The,'" of which it was a direct outgrowth. The particular "the" that this "A" indicates in the first instance is an apt example of a monumental work (Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*) in its ephemerality (the particular performance, in the days before everything was recorded). In the course of "A"-1 the poet-protagonist moves from the performance out into the heterogeneous contingency of the streets of New York, dissipating the force of the music in the dissonance of history or simply the everyday, even as its residual memory remains to critique the seeming given of the real. Thus the poem sets up complex interplays between "the" and "a," the particular in its dynamic with the social, which is all Zukofsky needs for a lifetime's poem.

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24 "Beginning again with William Carlos Williams," nominally a review of *A Voyage to Paganry*, was added as a postscript to the serial publication of "Henry Adams" in the *Hound & Horn* (Jan.-March 1931); in *Prepositions* it is gathered together with other pieces on Williams, without its original title (*Prep.* 51-53).

## V - More thanks to the dictionary: "Song 28" & "The Translation"

"Song 28" ("Specifically, a writer of music")

Included in *55 Poems* (1941) Zukofsky's only prose poem grew directly out of the *Thanks* project: each paragraph improvises from a given page of the dictionary.<sup>25</sup> However, in at least two respects this work is distinct from *Thanks*: there is a clear thematic and imagistic coherence, and there is no mention of the David narrative—although a statue of David does make a passing appearance. Opening with a quotation of the definition for "composer"—"Specifically, a writer of music"—the first three paragraphs circle around music and particularly the word "notes," which has the advantage of denoting both music and writing. This then gives way in the next three paragraphs to predominate images of dancing with an emphasis on stamping and measuring time. The reader therefore has a readily graspable thread to hold onto so that the diverse and abruptly shifting particulars can more or less be contained by musical associations and performative dynamicism. In this manner the poem manifests its self-definition. One can read each paragraph as a distinct movement of a verbal-musical composition that is being performed as it is composed or read. This broad trajectory also implicates Zukofsky's interest in the connection between music and dance, the latter the somatic action that is the origin of rhythm and therefore the wellspring of music and poetry or the arts generally, that is, dance as an active image for an ideal state of existence.<sup>26</sup> In "A"-7 sawhorses are set to dancing which the verse enacts through a heavily stressed, thumping measure—not necessarily graceful but nevertheless alive—lifting off the paper, so to speak. The first couple of paragraphs of "Song 28" highlight the body and kinesthetics, the complex of muscles of the human back ("complexus," the key term of the first paragraph is "complex") and the movement of a hand in the second, which also brings in the tormented but perpetually renewed body of Prometheus—an allegorical image of this poem in its dynamic between dissolution and generation.

The traditional idea of composition/music as expressing or enacting universal orders is announced at the outset, and the opening definition of a composer is immediately followed by: "The composite of notes proceeded with assumed qualities in a definite proportion. But, as dreamed, they controlled the nature of plants, bodies, etc., and the elements of the notes became not easy to separate" (CSP 61). This is a parable of the birth of metaphysics. From here there is threaded throughout familiar images of order, particularly numbers (prominently the number four), time and botanical or anatomical imagery, all implying the orders of Nature. Several of these principles of order are conflated in the mention of "four o'clock," the flower also known as the marvel of Peru that blooms from the late afternoon through the night (62). There are even some intriguing historical examples: Fourierism, the effort to establish a utopia on scientific principles, or Lao-tse's more metaphysical and passive sense of cosmic order (63).<sup>27</sup> All this concern with the paradigms of order as related to composition is summed up as follows:

If his notes could not extricate themselves from this complicated mass, they would be to his tactility like meeting at a point without further coincidence or intersection. If they did

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25 An early typescript of "Song 28" explicitly designates it as "from Thanks to the Dictionary" (HRC 17.2).

26 See for example the reworking of creation myths on the opening page or so of "A"-12 ("A" 126-127).

27 It is intriguing how many of these images or sources recur in Zukofsky's late poetry four decades later: the four-o'clock is one of the *80 Flowers* (CSP 330), Fourier's epitaph is incorporated into the concluding segment of "A"-23 ("A" 563) and a twelve line passage of "A"-22 is worked from Laozi (516), plus further lines from Zhuangzi (520).

extricate themselves, they would, moving towards a definite shape, become capable of being apprehended, themselves their own existence in the plain of surrounding existence, tactility of materials become tangible. (CSP 63)

Although written out of the entries for *tangle*, *tangent* and *tangible*, these are entirely Zukofsky's sentences. This is a creation fable (there are quite a few similar examples in *Bottom*) that posits a moment of separation or division, which stands in antithetical relation with the metaphysical perspective expressed in the sentence quoted above from the opening of "Song 28." The terms and movement from tactility to tangible can readily be mapped onto the "Objectivist" terms "sincerity" and "objectification, with tactility designating some inchoate experience—pure sensation, an absolute empiricism or Parmenidian thereness—but with potential for objective form, a separation wherein "shapes suggest themselves, and the mind senses and receives awareness [...] directing them along a line of melody" (*Prep.* 194). Whether understood in terms of epistemology, the phenomenological, aesthetics or the labor process, the model is dialectical—forms or objects are necessarily realized within and in relation to other forms and things.<sup>28</sup> Tactility (a word that does not appear in Zukofsky's dictionary) subject to difference or distinctions gives rise to the object or artifact situated in relation, its definition a matter of context as well as sensation. The two key terms wear their close relation while their distinction is being defined. The tangible was always a central poetic value for Zukofsky, indicating the roots of his poetics in Imagism, as well as his emphasis on the object-like status of the poem, a self-conscious distancing from the poem as unmediated expression. Tangibility, however, is not intrinsic to given words, definitions or discourses, and etymological primitivism or authenticity will not assure a heightened tactile sense of existence in the world. Rather it is a matter of collocation and contextualization.

Nevertheless, all these reassuring evocations of order cannot but be somewhat disconcerting. This is due less to our awareness of the dictionary as a primary source than that the use of the dictionary highlights the arbitrary shuffling between various order-evoking words. Zukofsky sneaks in the qualifying phrase "as dreamed" in the opening sentences relating the composition of musical notes to cosmic orders. The jump-cut texture of the poem tends to undermine any faith in metaphysical orders: by insistently drawing attention to itself as word-matter we are made conscious of the seemingly arbitrary metaphorical shifting from one verbal model to another and the disruptive reading experience grates against our habitual assumptions of proportion and coherence.

So far I have left to one side the seventh and final paragraph, which breaks with the general emphasis on music and dance, or words and images of order. Beginning with a unique instance of a spill-over, a continuation of the definition for "tango" from the previous paragraph, this final paragraph predominantly works with the various definitions for "dragon," and it ends by obliquely bringing in King David. In this case, the paragraph's final few sentences are entirely constructed out of snippets from four Psalms, which are then referenced. This conclusion's link with the dictionary lies in one of the definitions for "dragon," which mentions this word was used to translate the Hebrew term *tannim*. Although none of the quoted snippets are directly related to the word *tannim*, they plausibly might describe a dragon: "There went up a smoke out of his nostrils, and fire out of his mouth devoured [...]" (CSP 64), which in these cases are descriptions of an angry Yahweh. The appearance of the Psalms here parallels the abbreviated David narrative in *Thanks*, which is appropriate since if the David story functions as an archetype for narrative then the Psalms serve the same for lyric, of poetry's deep relation with sacred song. If the overt reference to the Psalms lends a certain traditional authority to the poem, giving it a venerable pedigree and genre, the poem's aggressive modernity, extending to its prose presentation, rewrites what we usually think a psalm or lyric to be. The hymn of praise is here to God as the everyday world or more strictly as the world of words desacralized, so that the dictionary is the new sacred text but "new" because no longer sacred

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28 We might add to this an apparent statement of intent for *That People the Sunbeams* quoted in "A"-12:

"The design: a drive of the nature of things / appearing in succession as ground, motion, and a / manifold perception of the former; as over an / abstract plane a shrug saving existence" (255).

other than the social authority any dictionary might be taken to have, until the next edition comes out. If this is somewhat corrosive to the authority of the Psalms, just as the body of *Thanks* decomposes the narrative of David, it is the dynamic of the dialectic that ought to be kept in mind. Seen or heard as a verbal construct, any psalm is infinitely generative, open to elaboration and rewriting, and indeed the Psalms tend toward endless revision and variations on themselves. They are a particularly apt example of the song or poem as semantically shallow (on paper), tediously repetitive praise, but when sung they are felt and enact a sense of community in the world at large, a sense of measure as existing in the world with others.

However, the dragon in its various senses, particularly as related to Yahweh, is clearly a counter to the suggestions of principles of coherence scattered throughout the previous paragraphs. So here the destructive principle or negation asserts itself.<sup>29</sup> As the poem, quoting the dictionary, suggests: "Scripturally, *tannim*, the meaning of which is uncertain" (CSP 64)—the uncertainty and difference that inhabits any text. The Psalms are particularly apt prototypes in this case as they are so often constructed along a sharp contrast between an angry God and the dire consequences of disobedience and the rewards of a pleased God, which could be understood as contrasting states of existence either in relative harmony with the totality or in conflict with it. The moral dualism of the Psalms becomes for Zukofsky a textual dialectic, the constant interplay of identity and difference that is particularly foregrounded in a work such as *Thanks*. If reading and interpretive habits predispose us to focus on images and principles of coherence, the counter-principle is always necessarily present, as a number of the most overtly literary allusions in the text remind us: the punishments of Prometheus (paragraph 2), of Mozart's *Don Giovanni* (paragraph 4) and of Tantalus (paragraph 6).

Aside from the snippets of the Psalms at the conclusion, the other explicit importation of non-dictionary text occurs in paragraph four, the precise middle of the poem, which opens and closes with sentences in quotation marks. The specific dictionary page for this paragraph covers the terms *donkey* to *Dorothea*, and therefore includes an entry for John Donne, which as with the occurrence of Davenant in *Thanks* offers the excuse to import a couple of quotations from his letters (again, Donne himself is not named). Placed in this context, these quotations are inevitably meta-critical. The first even echoes Davenant, "'For, I am at least half blind, my windows are all as full of glasses of waters as any mountebanks stall'" (CSP 62)—the limitations of any reading and text since words are never clear windows. The image of the poem as a stall or cabinet of jars of concoctions promising dubious medicinal or cosmetic benefits undoubtedly would appeal to Zukofsky's sense of humor, and this "window" is yet another image of refracted or distorted light that goes back to the well-known "Objectivist" definition. Outside of the quoted sentences there is further mention of faulty vision: "the field was impaired upon the point of their receding vision," which suggests a rejection of illusionistic perspective. Even more suggestive is the second extract: "'Sir, not only a mathematic point flowers into every line which is derived from a Center, but our soul which is but one, hath swallowed up a negative.'" Any point or center is generative, can lead anywhere else (cf. Wittgenstein, "A point in space is a place for an argument"; see "A"-13.287, *Bottom* 46-47). Flower and flora related definitions are found throughout *Thanks* as well as "Song 28." Intriguingly, Donne throws in "a negative." Presumably he is speaking of the soul but in the discourse of geometry (Spinoza-like) set into dialectical and generative motion, an amalgamation of geometric, theological and natural discourses, which is an apt definition of what Zukofsky is doing in his own writing of these texts.<sup>30</sup>

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29 Zukofsky's dictionary does not elaborate on *tannim* or *tannin*, but it is plausible that he knew this word designated a number of monstrous creatures in the Bible (variously translated as sea monster, whale, serpent, dragon), conventionally interpreted as representing evil or chaos.

30 In what seems to be a unique instance, Zukofsky has deliberately or inadvertently changed Donne's "floues" to "flowers"—that this is not a printing error is confirmed by the surviving draft (HRC 1.1). He has also abbreviated Donne's striking conceit, which is worth giving in full: "**Sir, not onely a**

## "The Translation"

This poem takes an entirely different tack in composing with the dictionary, featuring the importance of homophony as a compositional technique so central to the contemporaneous *Catullus* and much of Zukofsky's later poetry. Apparently "The Translation" is the last stand-alone short poem he composed (dated 1 Feb. 1964), after which all poetry was incorporated into "A" and *80 Flowers*.<sup>31</sup> Whereas in *Thanks* the page of the dictionary is a field of verbal material quasi-decomposed from its discursive forms and ready for Zukofsky's improvisations, with "The Translation" he seemingly consults his dictionaries in a more conventional manner. The opening stanza—"Wonder / once / whence / *mulier*"—undoubtedly echos Aristotle's famous remark that philosophy begins in wonder (see the opening of *Metaphysics*), a term that receives a good deal of emphasis in *Bottom* as designating the human impulse to inquiry. If this indicates a search for origins, the "once" gestures at the formulatic opening of fairytales that barely hides the fact that one must begin anywhere, which is never at the beginning. However, it is the aural leading of the first three words that already gestures at the sort of logic this poem will pursue, which reaches back to the sense of verbal play, or, a sense of tactility, a linguistic Aristotelian substance, out of which a tangible object can be shaped through differentiation.

Taking up the Latin word "*mulier*," meaning woman or wife, the poem traces denotations and etymological threads through standard Latin, Greek and English dictionaries, with some Italian thrown in at the end. The latter reveals this poem's occasion, although actually there are two. The poem was sparked when Zukofsky received a copy of a large Italian anthology of 20th century American poetry, which included several of his poems in translation. In the biographical note the editor, Carlo Izzo, notes the publication of *16 Once Published* (1962) by Ian Hamilton Finlay's Wild Hawthorn Press, which "a cura della moglie del poeta, che ha tratto poesie" (edited by the wife of the poet, who selected the poems)—one presumes this is a translation of Zukofsky's own note.<sup>32</sup> The instigating word for the poem, then, is actually "*moglie*," which etymologically derives from the Latin *mulier*.

The other occasion for the poem is that for some years Louis and Celia had been working together on *Catullus*, where obviously the word *mulier* appeared frequently enough in its range of meanings: woman, wife or mistress. In an important sense the poem is a love poem, a valentine to the poet's wife as companion and collaborator, and the definition of *mulier* that Zukofsky seeks is that which to his mind suits Celia.<sup>33</sup> This implies that the unique instance or person, or at least the

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**Mathematique point**, which is the most indivisible and unique thing which art can present, **flows into every line which is derived from the Center, but our soul which is but one, hath swallowed up a Negative**, and feeling soul; which was in the body before it came, and exercises those faculties yet; and God himselfe, who only is one, seems to have been eternally delighted, with a disunion of persons."

Zukofsky's source is *Letters to Severall Persons of Honour*, ed. Charles Edmund Merrill, Jr. (Sturgis & Walton, 1910), a copy of which he appears to have acquired at the time he was working on *Thanks*.

- 31 All the later long movements of "A" composed from 1964 on (beginning with "A"-14) incorporate readily identifiable discrete poems, that were in a number of cases initially published on their own in limited edition printings. In many cases they appear as prefatory segments in the complete movements, although "A"-21 includes a whole booklet worth of highly inventive shorter poems in the form of the "voice-offs" Zukofsky added to his rendition of Plautus' *Rudens*.
- 32 *Poesia Americana del '900*, ed. Carlo Izzo (Parma: Ugo Guanda, 1963): 977. In a letter to Cid Corman dated 1 Feb. 1964, Zukofsky mentions just receiving a copy of the anthology and that in response a new poem was "brewing" (HRC 18.9).
- 33 Given the dating of this poem at the beginning of February, this was the annual valentine that Zukofsky wrote more or less every year to Celia or to Celia and Paul since the early 1950s. Zukofsky placed it as the penultimate poem of his last collection of short poems, *After I's* (1964), followed by "Finally a Valentine," the preceding year's valentine, which he had already decided would be placed last, not only for this collection but for the anticipated volume collecting all his short poems.

poet's sense of that person, defines the word. In any case, this raises the previously mentioned problem at the heart of representation. As Zukofsky traces out various definitional possibilities and associations, he approves or rejects this or that option as unsuited to the definition he is in the process of finding or inventing. It has perhaps always been a poet's prerogative to newly mint words, but more to the point the poet takes advantage of the dialectical tension between authority and errancy. Zukofsky's poem is taking guidance but not authority from his dictionaries, which even when they register historical changes and accept the authority of use nevertheless tend to gravitate against a dynamic sense of definition.

The issue of authority comes up explicitly as the poet traces the affiliation of *mulier* in the classic Latin dictionary of Lewis and Short and is reasonably satisfied with what he finds: "not / bad / for / authority— / in / shorts / so / many / authorities— / you / know / what / authority / is— / when / short / each / has / authority—" (CSP 237).<sup>34</sup> Aside from the comical stance toward authority which is not going to be taken simply as such, playing off Short's name the poet evokes the Napoleon complex and assertion of authority that hides or compensates for a perceived lack. The strength and authority of definitions and of dictionaries generally always rests on arbitrary exclusions, all the rest of the words and definitions, but more importantly their situated performative aspect, an instance of which the poem is here enacting. The definitions of *mulier* that please the poet are: "movable / pliant / flexible / supple / soft / delicate / gentle / mild / pleasant" (CSP 236-237). Before we simply conclude that these are stereotypical characterizations of male ideas of femininity, we should keep in mind that the poet's wife is not introduced until the very end of the poem, and what is being talked about here are words, whose characteristics of suppleness, pliancy and pleasantness are what the poet needs as against a masculinized authority and its hangups over shortness. If the poem searches for the appropriate definition for Celia, the wife here is equally the poem itself which we see in the process of defining or realizing itself, but then this necessarily implicates the desired reader who also is the woman or wife the poet/poem seeks. We will return to this question of gender, a central allegorical dimension of the poem, in a moment.

The most obvious means of undermining the authority of the dictionary is Zukofsky's fondness for punning connections rather than properly etymological linkages. Of course etymological kinship often enough look or sound like species of puns, and the recognition of such similarities are an endless source of false or folk etymologies. In any case, from the time he worked on *Catullus*, inter-lingual punning became a standard compositional technique, whether in set pieces, like the prefatory section of "A"-15 from the Hebrew of Job, or more loosely and ubiquitously, as particularly in "A"-23 and *80 Flowers*. Given that "The Translation" is in one sense an homage to his wife for their collaborative work on *Catullus*, then it is appropriate that he indulges in a bit of this here.

In fact on the first page he tries a *Catullus*-like translation of *mulier*: "*my / love / air*" or alternatively a more literalist reading, "*mule- / ier*." The apparently antithetical denotations implied by these two renditions of the "same" word are an apt example of the dynamic verbal possibilities that interested him. However, in this case he decides neither of these is quite acceptable. On the next page he homophonically digresses into an American dictionary with the word *mulley* and its variants (*mooley*, *moolea*—the latter evidently Zukofsky's own invention), an Americanism of apparently Celtic origin meaning a polled animal or hornless (another version of shortening) or in English dialect simply a cow or perhaps it is just a child's word, presumably nonsensical.<sup>35</sup> None of this has any proper relation to the Latin or the Greek he will jump into next, and appears to be a dead end in his search for the definition he wants. Indeed one might wonder just what this digression into the English dictionary is all about. As the poem stages it, the poet is about to consult his Latin dictionary only to inexplicably jump on the basis of a loose homonym into the English

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34 Charlton T. Lewis & Charles Short, *A Latin Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, [1879] 1958).

35 Zukofsky is using *Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, 5th edition; a different edition from that used in *Thanks*.

dictionary instead, and once he exhausts these possibilities he returns to his original intention and picks up the Latin dictionary. This detour into home territory not only conjures non-classical roots but in the mention of dialect and then children's babble implicates the hothouse of verbal creation in the colloquial and linguistic play—in street talk and babble, we might say. If *Webster's* represents a certain version of definitive authority, then Lewis and Short's *A Latin Dictionary* and Liddell and Scott's *Greek Lexicon* surely represent the ultimate in such linguistic embalment, a total accounting of highly venerable but now dead languages. But *Catullus* and "The Translation" are all about razzle-dazzling these dead languages by bringing them up into living possibilities suggested by non-standard pronunciations and a child-like poet's play. In this sense, this detour into the American dictionary serves as preparation for the following ventures into the classical dictionaries.

Perhaps the most suggestive inter-lingual homophone appears in the very first lines of the poem where he introduces his seed word *mulier* and its meaning "woman," which immediately evokes *mens*, Latin for mind, intellect, reason, but as the poem points out, "sounds / other / sense / in / native / homonym—" (CSP 234). So the gendered argument is implicated at the outset, along with an "other sense" than intellect or reason as normally deployed. The *mens* of the dictionaries will be resisted by the poet's preference for the feminine. After all, for a poet like Zukofsky, the poet, the poem and its readers all need to be pliant. If we bring in the collaborative work on *Catullus* once again, there is a comic bit of gender reversal in that it was Celia who was the poet's dictionary, supplying a proper word by word translation with grammatical notations and metrical scansion, from which Louis made his homophonically suggested improvisations—the pliable, soft and pleasant one in this case. Indeed, at the end of the poem he echoes the Italian quotation concerning Celia's editing of *16 Once Published* with "who / has / picked / poetry / from / *mens*—" (CSP 239). This could mean that Celia chose poems from the body of Zukofsky's short poems, or that she selected them according to her mind or intellect, or that she has picked out the poetic from the mere intellect content.

The form of this poem is worth noting: single-word lines in stanzas of four words/lines each, with a characteristic inexplicable exception slipping in in the eighth stanza. Initially the grouping into stanzas appears arbitrary, merely enhancing the airiness of the presentation, since syntactically they usually spill over into the following, yet this addition of sub-divisions and breaks suggests alternative pauses and emphases that augment the verbal dynamism: the reader has a sense of the four-word unit asserting itself and receding in the course of the poem—a use of stanza form Zukofsky developed alongside Williams. All of this obviously draws attention to the discrete words, appropriately enough, and beyond that even to the discrete letters since there are a half dozen instances of the article "a" and one of the pronoun "I," which is further extended by some spelling ("l, e, a / why / l, e, y"), an abbreviation ("q. / v.") and a phonetic trailing off to conclude the poem ("breath / sof- / t- / t"). The particles and parts of the poem are on full display. Although this attention to the individual words and letters tends to slow down the reading process to encourage an aural and visual fondling of the words, Zukofsky characteristically counterpoises this with a casual conversational voice, the poet talking to himself or his dictionaries in a quite unselfconscious fashion. If read out loud straight through, the entire poem takes well under two minutes, although spread over six full pages. Zukofsky is quite fond of this kind of fast-slow dynamic, which suggests the interplay of quite distinct readings whether the ear or the eye is given priority ("A"-14 is an obvious extended example). After all, as we have seen, the sense of the poem can be understood as little concerned with dictionary authority, its semantic and etymological concerns, but rather with the process of generating a poem which expresses through that enactment his sense of love for and companionship with his wife, or by extension for his readers. This enactment is necessarily semantically oblique, must resist to an extent the authority and protocols of dictionaries.

The poem is a fine example of Zukofsky's light touch, both personal and playful—markedly different from the usual manner of interpolating what Michael Davidson designates "lexical inserts," the incorporation of dictionary definitions and particularly etymological information

directly into poems.<sup>36</sup> For Pound, Olson or for that matter Heidegger, such inserts are a strategy for renewing terms, peeling away historical encrustations or the routinization of key words—a defamiliarizing technique—but which always entails the assumption that word origins have a superior truth value, even purity. Zukofsky never adopts such a view, nor the earnestness of its linguistic moralizing. Linguistic meaning is its use or enactment, and in that sense is always unique and consequently variable and shifting. Inter-linguistic punning is an overt embrace of hybridity, a feeling out of in between linguistic spaces or sounds. The etymological tracings in "The Translation" are not a procedure for uncovering more primordial or authentic definitions, but on the contrary evidence of the constant historical shifting and remaking that is the life of words in the present.

#### VI - Postscript: A Note on *80 Flowers*

There is an exaggerated idea in some quarters of the importance of dictionaries in Zukofsky's work. One version of this view argues that the dictionary is the ultimate authority for determining the multiple definitions and etymological relations the ideal reader should take into consideration for any given word—a perspective that hypothetically could be taken of any poet's work.<sup>37</sup> This congers an image of Zukofsky's work as intimidatingly erudite and formalistic, even hermetic, like those comically pretentious photos of Geoffrey Hill skeptically looking out at the reader backed up by a wall of the complete OED behind him. The most obvious counter-evidence is Zukofsky's frequent and idiosyncratic use of punning or composition by homophonic suggestion that becomes prominent in his later work and pays scant attention to whether or not the homophones have any cognate justification. As we have seen, these may be suggested by reference books but never limited by their authority, nor is there ever any faith in etymological authenticity. As far as modern poets go, Zukofsky did not lean particularly heavily on the dictionary, aside from the works discussed above, and "lexical inserts" or similar direct incorporation of dictionary materials are rare, despite the impression given by the well-known opening of the "Objectivists" program statement, which was rhetorically effective for the purpose at hand. In "A", a poem one might think offered ample opportunities, the dictionary plays a surprisingly minor role, although "A"-18 does include a long passage quoted from the preface to Samuel Johnson's dictionary on the impossibility of fixing words and definitions in this "sublunary" world ("A" 395-396).

Curiously, the exception to this generalization is Zukofsky's last work, *80 Flowers* (1974-1978), where he frequently draws on the multi-volume *Century Dictionary* and a dozen other word reference books, including a few on slang and Americanisms.<sup>38</sup> I will simply observe here, without pretending to demonstrate, that again Zukofsky is mining these sources, along with an armful of

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36 Michael Davidson, "'From the Latin *Speculum*': Ezra Pound, Charles Olson, and Philology," in *Ghostlier Demarcations: Modern Poetry and the Material Word* (University of California Press, 1997): 94-98.

37 Admittedly Zukofsky occasionally gave some credence to this view, such as when Guy Davenport asked him the meaning of "mg. dancer" in "A"-21 and gave a short list of guesses suggested by the dictionary, to which the poet predictably responded, "All." Or, in a reading-interview with Hugh Kenner commenting at some length on "Bayberry" from *80 Flowers*, he details his use of the *Century Dictionary* among other sources, but while this tells us something about how he went about writing the poem, it does not solve much in terms of how to read it. Zukofsky could be mischievous in responding to academic queries, although he was appreciative of the interest. Guy Davenport, *The Geography of the Imagination* (North Point, 1981): 103; a transcription of the "Bayberry" commentary can be found in Michele J. Leggott, *Reading Zukofsky's 80 Flowers* (Johns Hopkins UP, 1989): 369-372.

38 Zukofsky acquired a copy of the ten volume *Century Dictionary* in the early 1950s, but although this became a favorite, as "The Translation" indicates this was not invariably his dictionary of choice in his later years. In fact the *80 Flowers* notebooks indicate not only that he sometimes consulted the *Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, 5th edition but on occasion picked up the old volumes used in *Thanks*. The *Century* was an American rival to the *OED* with very full etymological information and sample historical quotations. As far as I know, Zukofsky never directly consulted the *OED* at any time.

botanical reference books, primarily for vocabulary, out of which he constructs his curious verbal contraptions. These poems are not really about flowers, but foreground their textual matter such that the individual words stand out with often only tenuous relations to their neighbors. The expected grammatical and syntactical glue is brittle at best, so that the words (very heavily weighted toward substantives) seem relatively free-floating or open to an array of dynamic interrelations—an effect enhanced by the poems' square-like look on the page (Zukofsky certainly has the sonnet sequence in mind). In contrast to the frequent appearance of technical-scientific words in *Thanks*, what Zukofsky took from his dictionaries for *80 Flowers* were unusual, often obsolete words or antiquated senses of seemingly familiar words. He was also interested in etymological suggestions, but again not particularly for tracing word-origins but rather picking up alternative word forms. And the *Century* also supplied the majority of the literary quotations Zukofsky noted down (including from Shakespeare), as its copious historical samples are predominately literary and poetic. As Scroggins points out, every word in *80 Flowers* can be traced back to the quotations noted in Zukofsky's notebooks (*Poem of a Life* 454-455), yet at the same time not only have a high percentage of the words been altered but the large majority are "quoted" as single words rather than as anything remotely recognizable as a literary allusion or echo. In sum, all this elaborate compiling of botanical, lexical and literary quotation and information is simply Zukofsky's means of accumulating word matter out of which to compose his poems. One might imagine that he could have simply taken his *Webster's Collegiate* or *Funk & Wagnalls* and selected here and there to come up with pretty much the same sort of poems (any such dictionary includes a large quantity of botanical definitions). However, this was not the way Zukofsky liked to work, but rather he devised his own methods of working his way into his materials through this mazy research into words and their possibilities. Botany itself, particularly picked out of the descriptive reference works Zukofsky used, is a web of Latin names (often derived from Greek), colloquial names, families, genera, species and minute but endless variations on stock features of plants (leaves, flowers, fruit, etc.), precisely the sort of word intricacy that Zukofsky wanted. Again it is the frequent use of homophonic suggestion that most obviously indicates that the actual flowers and their botanical features are not primarily what these poems are about. "Chokecherry" begins: "Prune us serried teen sear" (CSP 341), which mostly derives from *Prunus serotina*, the Latin name for the choke cherry, which colloquially is also called wild black cherry, as in the second line. It is amusing to pick up on such off-punning if one has sufficient botanical knowledge in one's head, which Zukofsky himself certainly did not, or otherwise has these relations brought to their attention. But there is no such expectation or requirement. The poems themselves foreground clearly enough what they are about: words in dynamic interrelation, not least their aural senses, the pleasures of awakening to the possibilities latent in what we too often take as fixed on the page.

28 Oct. 2021

5 June 2022, note 19 corrected