LZ's Comments on #22 "Bayberry"

LZ rarely offered explanations of his own poetry, and in terms of both detail and giving some insight into his late working process, the following remarks are unique. This commentary is part of a discussion and reading recorded by Hugh Kenner on 13 December 1975 at The Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, Maryland, which includes a reading of the "Epigraph" through #22 "Bayberry," the only recording of LZ reading from *80 Flowers*. The tape was transcribed by Andy Campbell and checked by Leggott. The entire reading and discussion can be heard at PennSound.

Lightly edited from Michele Leggott, *Reading Zukofsky's 80 Flowers* (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 369-372.

LZ: I'll give you an idea of what those things in the last one mean. A few of the things . . . The source of this is really the first poem in *Anew*, if you remember. The one that has the footnote about the bay . . .[1]
HK: Yea, uh-huh.
LZ: You remember that?
HK: I remember that.
LZ: Ah — And all the variations. As Guy [Davenport] said, he asked, "Which do you mean?" and I said, "All the connotations a reader can get out of it, that's up to him," you know[2], and I gave various ideas of bay, you know, an inlet of the sea, a bay horse, a bay, you know, all kinds, window bay; I don't know, there are probably at least a dozen. And we planted some bayberry, and of course it is used as a spice, and it has this resin wax on it, on the underleaf; there are

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1 LZ refers to a long note he appended to *Anew* 1:

"che di lor suona su nella tua vita" / Continuing with Dante (limbo, *The Inferno*, IV, 77)

The comma in line 1 of this poem is meant as a pause in the expectancy of the dream. Perhaps the capital B of "Break," after the opening quotes of line 2, gives the feeling of some unexpected person taking part in one's expected activity: I was aware in the dream that I was writing a poem and also aware of verses by others.

The word "bay" is what I could reconstruct later from the feeling of the action in the dream, as I moved from place to place, and should convey something of all the meanings of the word "bay": red-brown, the laurel, the laurel wreath, a bay horse, a deep bark or cry, a window-bay, a large space in a barn for storage as of a hay or fodder, the state of being kept at a standstill, but more specifically two meanings that seemed to include all the others, they are, an arm of the sea and a recess of low land between hills.

The "glasses of preserves" were sealed with white wax.

The waters teemed like flood waters, but perhaps this is an afterthought. They were certainly *falls*, tons of them off the side, on a curve, and nearly on the level of the ramp, and the ramp seemed to be running away at the curve.

When I awoke the exact words of the poem I dreamt were lost, but those I wrote down still seemed to follow on the events of the dream. Later, that morning, Dante's "Which sounds of them, up in that life of thine" seemed an appropriate explanation (*CSP* 102-103).

2 It is possible that Davenport asked LZ about "bay" in *Anew* 1, although it seems likely that LZ is conflating his note to this poem with a query about a different detail: Davenport "once asked Zukofsky what the 'mg. dancer' is who dances in "A"-21 [465], a milligram sprite, a magnesium elf, a margin dancer, or Aurora, as the dictionary allows for all of these meanings. 'All,' he replied" (*Geography of the Imagination* 103). This appeared in a review-essay of *"A"-24* published in *Parnassus* (Spring-Summer 1974).

little spots of wax, resin, you know. And there are the family of bayberry, Linnaeus-wise, there are only two genera of the family which is *Myricaceae*. So there's the *Myrica* bayberry, which is called candleberry, sometimes wax myrtle; those are the popular names for it. The second genera is *Comptonia* (named after a guy called Compton I guess, or something in America [actually Henry Compton, Bishop of London]) and sweet-fern; and it's really not a fern. People get confused. It's really of the same family as the bayberry but the leaves are sort of pinnated, you know, divided, and it hugs the bark very closely. The flowers of both of these things are just inconspicuous; sometimes you don't see them at all. It's only when, you know, when you look at it, with a microscope.

Now, so I've used that information. I start with candleberry because they're also used to make candles. In fact, [Hayden] Carruth sent me one I think, a few years ago. So it starts with "Candleberry bayberry spice." I get the nature of it because it's used as a spice. "Resinwax," that's obvious. "Green durant leaf." "Durant," and that's where Dante comes in. You remember, I start "che di lor suona su nella," which sounds up into, . . . "la tua vita," which sounds up into "the life of thine," as I translate it, which is — where does that come from? I don't know. I give the source in the footnote there in *Anew*. I guess it's the *Inferno* probably. The name Dante: do you know what that means?

HK: No.

LZ: It's still used today: it's deer-skin. And it's enduring. You know, it presumably holds. So it's "durant leaf."

Where I get the "moor in key"? Not only does it grow on moor, you know swampland, and so on, the bayberry, and near the ocean, but [*Myrica*] is the old Greek word, not for [missing text] tended to be bulbous or drab or tawny, which is the same word, and it's also waxy and spotted. They think that was the Greek word for tamarisk [μυρίκη, *myrike*].[3] It's like all these things, I look up Theophrastus [*Enquiry into Plants*]. All that goes into a word. Celia sees me lugging the *Century Dictionary* or this dictionary [and she says] "When you gonna stop?" And then she has better moods.

Alright: "durant leaf," so there's where I get Dante in. "Moor in key," you have your Greek. "Dour," D-O-U-R is Scotch for hardened. Of course, the more vulgar meaning is sour, you know, sour-puss, or something like that, but really used all the time for hardened, tested by life, enduring life, and so on. "Deer wit . . . (and that of course) . . . winds survive." You know the winds do better than the hides of deer.

"Days *hippos*" — those are the only three words I underline, I use italics, *hippos*, *wooden*, *compt*. Alright I'll explain each one. *Hippos* is non-slang, if you don't know. It means deceptions, trickster, you know, anybody who cheats, and so on. The "rampant" I have in the early *Anew* poem, "Waters / Of the ramp / Running away." Well, I worked that in. My original source, that's my private knowledge.

"Wooden" is the other word I underlined. And that comes right in out of the *Odyssey*, Book 8, 493, where it's mentioned only once. It's one of those rarities. He talks about "the wooden." And it's the wooden horse he's referring to. And the Greek of that is *durateos* (*δοιρατεος*). So you see I already have the dour there: "dour attested," witnessed, you see, and if you say it a little faster, I've got Homer in there. But you don't and — it's the only time that

3 LZ is evidently referring to the confusion over the name "bayberry." According to *Taylor's Encyclopedia of Gardening*, LZ's primary source for *80 Flowers*, "bayberry" properly designates *Pimenta acris* of the family *Myrtaceae*, which is rarely cultivated in the U.S. where "bayberry" commonly refers to *Myrica*, especially *M. pensylvanica* and *M. cerifera*.

it's this "wooden"; he mentions it by an adjective. And that's the way A. S. Way, you know, interprets it and all the Homeric scholars, a word that he used once. They have a term for that; I don't know. So that is in there. But a few lines later on, line 516 [actually 512], he mentions hippos, that is the — very indignant, you know! — about the Trojan deception and he mentions *hippos*. So finally we get back to the line before and you know what wooden is because he has an adjective substitute for a noun. So that's "*wooden*."

"Ancient standstill . . ." (well, I'll go on reading again) "plummet," that is out of *The Tempest*. A standstill is, well, it's a standstill, is waiting, nothing happens. "Plummet," right out of *The Tempest* then, how, I don't know — I can't remember the exact . . . but it's in Prospero's speech when he throws his book away and so on . . . ever did plummet . . .

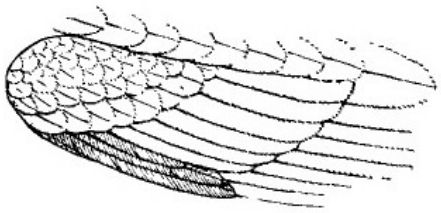
HK: "Deeper than did plummet sound."

LZ: "Deeper than did ever plummet sound." Memory! Alright. Now *compt* is used a number of times and I wanted to get this man Compt-, the botanical name *Comptonia* in, and Shakespeare uses it a number of times, and especially as the Day of Compt, at the end of *Othello* there, the day of judgment. You see, he'll stand there, and it's the Day of Compt, really "account." And, shall I use this? This is a kind of "A"-11 situation I argued again; shall I revive this old word and the hell with what people make of it or shall I use "account"? It's just too corny for me today. So I had a hard time getting that in.

The willow business . . . do I mention willow?

Well, the "birds alula." The alula, you know, are the wings that can't open and fly; they're rather the counterpart of the thumb in a human being. And they're right near the breast. You find that in any dictionary, but I found a picture of it, I don't know — many years ago — in the *Century Dictionary* and I always wanted to use that. And it's a nice sound there.

alula (al′ū-lä), *n.*; pl. *alulæ* (-lē). [NL., dim. of *ala*, wing: see *aisle*.] **1** In *ornith.*, the winglet, bastard wing, or ala spuria of a bird; the packet of small feathers which grows upon the so-called thumb of a bird's wing.



Alula (the shaded part in the figure).

The feathers are rather stiff, resembling primaries to some extent, but always smaller, and contribute to the smoothness and evenness of the border of the wing.

2. In *entom.*: (*a*) The small membranous appendage or scale situated at the base of each wing of many dipterous insects, above the halteres or poisers. (*b*) A similar appendage beneath each elytron of some water-beetles. Also called *alulet* and *cucilleron*.

In certain water beetles (Dytiscidæ) a pair of *alulæ*, or winglets, are developed at the inner angle of the elytra.

Encyc. Brit., VI. 127.

Besides, we're talking about spring, and so there they are, whatever spring it is. We trust. That is kind of personal. We found this bit of sweet-fern and a lady who is a rose specialist identified it, and she said, "No, that's not a fern." One of the other specialists said, "That's a sweet-fern; everybody knows that." It grows by the roadside. Wonderful dark green leaf above, you know, pinnated-like, you know, jagged, because you call the whole thing a leaf no matter how many cutting it has, and underneath it's this beautiful brown. And of course we loved it right away; we planted it. It never grew, but I think it's growing now next to the bayberry because I sniffed it the other day and, boy, it's pungent and really alive. So we hope the spring brings it up.

The willows are interesting. The willows are what you call dioecious in botany, that is, the sexes grow on different trees or different parts of the tree in some of them. But there is the . . . if there is the male willow around, there is probably a female there too. So that's sort of an interesting . . .

So there it is. Now, when you get back to it, you see how it sounds. [*Rereads the poem, remarking at the last line:*] Willows always growing in the sandy region.

And the "gibbous" is brought in at the end because, you know what gibbous is? The arms of the moon are convex — both of them — and it's this irregular shape which is approaching, well, it's between a half-moon and a full moon.

Now, the only other thing, the "unprotected laurel crown," there is the other bay; which is . . . and that other bay, that's underwater "than ever plummet . . ."

So, alright. This is how Zukofsky amuses himself. And they say, they ask me, do I amuse myself? God, no! But when it's done, well then, that's it — at least it's out of the way, damn it.