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Poetry's upper limit

Abstract:

Louis Zukofsky's poetic work has always been noted for its difficulty. Throughout his career, he kept in mind the principles created by Ezra Pound, and he made music the focus of his poems. This focus is all the more visible in his major work "A". Composed of 24 movements, "A" is the culmination of its author's capabilities. There, Zukofsky famously expressed his poetic views using the integral

$$\int_{\text{speech}}^{\text{music}}$$

where speech and music are the limits defining the interval in which poetry is bound. "A"-24, the poem's last movement, is an illustration of Zukofsky's will to create a musical poetry. Written with the help of his wife, Celia, and otherwise titled *L.Z. Masque*, the poem is composed of four different lines of text, all quotations from works by Zukofsky. Marked T for thoughts, D for Drama, S for story, P for poetry, Zukofsky's different works are there set to music, using Handel's *Harpsichord Pieces*. The superimposition of these different works leads to a shift in the perception of the poetic work. In this radical challenge to the practice of reading, Zukofsky's movement pushes poetry to the limit, one that needs to be questioned.

Biographical note:

Etienne Garnier is a third-year PhD student at the University of Angers. His doctoral thesis is entitled "À l'aune du bref: les atomes du réel de la poésie objectiviste" and is supervised by Emmanuel Vernadakis and François Hugonnier in the laboratory Centre Interdisciplinaire de Recherches sur le Patrimoine en Lettres et Langues (CIRPaLL EA7457). The thesis is part of the research of the second axis of the laboratory: "Nouvelles et formes brèves." Etienne Garnier works on 20th century American poetry and on Objectivist poetry, a movement that he studies in its relationship with short forms and the representation of reality.

Keywords:

Limit, poetry, music, Zukofsky, Objectivist, Bach, Handel

Introduction

At the turn of the 20th century, poetry faced a crisis as the old rhythmical schemes and the strict adherence to verses were felt as impediments to the expression of modernity. Various poetic movements – among which imagism was central – led the way to redefine poetry as a medium. Even though he spent most of his career in a state of relative anonymity, Louis Zukofsky has come to be seen in his later years as a symbol of an ever-renewed attempt to push poetry beyond its accepted limits. He began to be recognised in the years following the publication his Objectivist manifesto [1], which he wrote and published under the impulse of Ezra Pound. The two poets elaborated a complex and ambiguous relationship where they could be seen as father and son. However, they would never reconcile their poetical – as well as political – differences as Zukofsky, at the beginning of his career, was influenced by Marx and was interested in the creation of a useful poetry, one that could further the cause of the proletariat [2].

Beyond this association that has also to do with strategies and career development, Zukofsky, throughout his career, elaborated a complex poetry that paved the way for a new generation after WWII. The works written by Zukofsky are far from being monolithic, yet a case can be made for a unity of ambition in the whole of his career; a formalist at heart, he was mainly concerned with furthering poetry as a medium, with unleashing its potential.

Focusing on the reference to music and mathematics, this paper will aim to interrogate the place the two disciplines had as structural principles in Zukofsky's poetry. His early poetry shows an interest in the mathematical aspects of his poetry, but we will see that these mathematical concerns are not far removed from a general interest in music. Then, focusing on *Catullus*, we shall try to see how the process of translation as envisioned by Zukofsky is revelatory of a conciliation between these two interests beyond a professed shift toward sound. Finally, the analysis of "A"-12 and "A"-24 will allow us to further study the relationship between music and poetry, showing how they furthered the poet's ambition to push poetry toward its limits.

Poetry in "The" major

The life and work of Louis Zukofsky are testaments to the cultural and political maelstrom that was the United States at the beginning of the 20th century. Born in a recently emigrated Jewish family, who only spoke Yiddish, he only learned English as a second language [3]. As a consequence, in the early parts of his career, he struggled with the feeling of being an outsider. After writing his first poems, he soon turned to the experiments that began to emerge in Europe, led by T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. Early on, Zukofsky drew the attention of Ezra Pound with "Poem beginning The," an elaboration and response to Eliot's *The Waste Land* which it directly alludes to:

Kerith is long dry, and the ravens that
brought the prophet bread
Are dust in the waste land of a raven-
winged evening.
And why if the waste land has been explored,

traveled over, circumscribed,
 Are there only wrathless skeletons exhumed
 new planted in its sacred wood, [...] (Zukofsky, 2011, pp. 12–13)

The poem also displays an introductory text, a short commentary listing the major works used in the poem (Zukofsky, 2011, p. 11) just like Eliot had done in *The Waste Land*. In the same manner, Zukofsky regularly quotes other works, more specifically those Eliot turned to in order to legitimise and give sense to his epic [4].

Why – heir, long dead – Odysseus, wandering of ten years
 Out-journeyed only by our Stephen, bibbing
 of a day,
 O why is that to Hecuba as Hecuba to he! (Zukofsky, 2011, p. 13)

If Zukofsky has been influenced by Eliot, the comparison between the two stops here as he turned his sight elsewhere, towards the structures of poetry [5]. Where Eliot clung to what he could salvage of the jetsam and flotsam of European culture [6], Zukofsky argued that poetry was a manifestation of the unity of all human thought. In “Poem beginning The,” Zukofsky tackled the question of structure by dividing his poem into six movements called respectively: “And out of olde bokes, in good feith,” “International Episode,” “In Cat Minor,” “More ‘Renaissance,’” “Autobiography,” and “Finale and After”. These “movements,” referring to “the various complete and comparatively independent divisions of the sonata, symphony, etc.” (Apel, 1974, p. 547) are the compositional backbones of a poem that has to be played using a certain key: “The”. Thus, the poem announces the thematic and structural ambitions of his later poetry.

Zukofsky expressed early on an interest in the long poem and began working in 1928 on his own which would become the work of his life [7]. The long poem proved particularly attractive to modernist poets, see *The Cantos* by Pound, *Paterson* by Williams, or *The Bridge* by Hart Crane [8]. From the start, Zukofsky knew how many movements his poem would comprise, but he only had the faintest idea of its content. The poem and its earliest movements display a great amount of formal diversity, once again showcasing the poet’s virtuosity – one of the main examples may be “A”-9 in which Zukofsky used the rhythmical pattern of Cavalcanti’s “*Donna me prega*” [9] to express his interest in Marxist theory. In this movement, Zukofsky replaces the discourse about love with a discourse about the theories of commodity first elaborated by Marx:

An impulse to action sings of a semblance
 Of things related as equated values,
 The measure all use is time congealed labor ... (Zukofsky, 1978, p. 106)

Donna me prega, per ch’eo voglio dire
 d’un accidente che sovente – è fero
 ed è sì altero ch’è chiamato amore ... (Cavalcanti, 1986, p. 38)

If Marx certainly had an importance in the life and thoughts of Zukofsky, its influence lessened in Zukofsky's later works. After graduating, rather than pursue a graduate degree at Columbia University, he decided to dedicate his life to writing, but, facing difficulties to earn a living, he had no other choice but to teach. After a small period at the University of Wisconsin, which he described as miserable [10], he returned to New York to teach at Stuyvesant High, where he met Jerry Reisman, a young man who "showed aptitude for mathematics and engineering" while "Zukofsky was trying to encourage his interest in poetry" (Scroggins, 2007, p. 72). It is through this friendship that the young poet developed a keen interest in mathematics, which he would pair with his passion for music.

As Zukofsky kept on working on the first movements of "A", he showed his fascination with the poetical possibilities brought by mathematics [11]. Thus, some parts of "A"-8 display a hidden principle of organisation that underlines this affinity between the two. The archives kept at the Harry Ransom Center allow us to see that Zukofsky isolated and numbered each "n" and "r" in various stanzas of the movement. The idea behind this practice was to be able to represent his work as an equation which could be drawn on a graph. Zukofsky detailed his project on loose leaves in his personal papers which are stacked with graphs depicting Zukofsky's attempts to represent the results of his equation:

For a circle of a rad[ius] = 4, Choose two poetic variables x and y. Divide them into 9 stanzas or divisions. In each stanza or division, which corresponds to an equivalent point on the circle with rad[ius] = 4, the ratio of the acceleration of y per line per line to the acceleration of x per line per line must be equal to $\frac{d^2y}{dx^2}$ calculated for that point.

...

The analogue to the calculus is that the ratio of the acceleration of 2 sounds (r, n) is equal to the ratio of the accelerations of the coordinates (x, y) of a particle moving in a circular path to nine symmetrically located points on the path. (Zukofsky, n.d.)

This attempt to use mathematics for aesthetic reasons brings to mind the works of the Pythagoreans. While Pythagoras is an enigmatic figure of Greek history, his name is still associated with a number of fundamental theorems still taught nowadays. He was also at the origins of a theory of the harmony of the spheres according to which the planets in the solar system each produced a different sound following the mathematical relations that governed them. Pythagoras never wrote anything and the few glimpses that we get of his teachings are second-hand such as this summary by Aristotle:

the so-called Pythagoreans, in their interest in mathematics, were the first to bring these in and, being involved in them, they thought that the principles of mathematical entities were the principles of all entities. ... and they thought that the whole heaven was a harmony and a number. (Aristotle, 2004, pp. 18–19)

Zukofsky always had a deep affinity with this theory which can be linked to the Jewish practice of gematria, a discipline in which letters and numbers are used to produce meaning:

The first nine letters of the alphabet represent the numbers one through nine; the next ten represent the numbers ten through one hundred; and the final three letters represent two hundred, three hundred, and four hundred.) ... Jewish scholars, since late antiquity, have used this duality of the meaning of the letters as a tool, mostly for homiletical and exegetical purposes. (Baskin, 2011, p. 461)

Later, the gematria expanded to be used in “the writings of esoterics and mystics” (Baskin, 2011, p. 461) [12]. This particular mathematical model explored by Zukofsky was not reused in this manner in his later poetry [13]. Louis Zukofsky rather decided to explore another aspect of poetry and focused on the parallels between poetry and music. However if his translation of the poems by Catullus show that music and poetry are intrinsically linked, mathematics are never really far from his mind.

The sound of translation

After working on a complex and spreading study of Shakespeare – *Bottom: on Shakespeare* – for a decade, Zukofsky moved on to his other project, a translation of the works of Catullus. The Roman poet was part of the neoterics, a group of poets who could be compared to the modernists as they were distinguished by:

their learned allusiveness; their distaste for long, sprawling, pompous and cliché-ridden poetry ... their obsession with brevity, originality, and aptness of phrase; their personal rather than public preoccupation; and their reexamination of traditional myths for unusual (and often pathological or aberrant sexual) features hitherto ignored, in particular as these related to the origins or causes (aida) of traditional customs and practices. (Green, “Introduction” in Catullus 2005, p. 10)

The poet was not interested in writing a simple translation, one that would focus on meaning. Rather Zukofsky aimed at translating the sound of the poems, their music. Zukofsky detailed his project in his introduction: “This translation of Catullus follows the sound, rhythm, and syntax of his Latin—tries, as is said, to breathe the ‘literal’ meaning with him” (Zukofsky, 2011, p. 243).

In beginning to work on these translations, Zukofsky found himself following Pound who described the practice of poetry as charging words with “*phanopoeia, melopoeia, logopoeia*” (Pound, 1979, p. 37). These three words corresponded to the “visual image” on “the reader’s imagination,” to the charging of words “by sound,” and the combined use of “groups of words to do this” (p. 37). In this translation, Zukofsky tried to underline the *melopoeia* within the poetry of Catullus [14]:

Whom do I give my neat little volume
Cui dono lepidum nouum libellum
slicked dry and made fashionable with pumice?
arida modo pumice expoliturum?

...
Care, as you did, somewhat for this little book,

quare habe tibi quid quid hoc libelli
 whatever quality, patroness virgin,
 quaecumque; quod, <o> patrona uirgo,
 may outlast a perennial cycle.
 plus uno maneat perenne saeclo! [15]

Syntax and meaning were accessory to Zukofsky and his only concern was for the sound which he tried to keep as close as possible to the text of origin. He focused mainly on a few pivotal sounds around which he built his verses. For example, he translated the word “*quare*” into the verb “care” even though, in Latin, “*quare*” is an adverb introducing a new sentence meaning “therefore, hence” (*Oxford Latin Dictionary*, 1968, p. 1542). Meanwhile in the last line of the translation, Zukofsky tried to maintain the plosive <p>, through the couple “perennial”-“perenne”, and fricative <s>, through the pair “cycle”-“saeclo”.

The sixth Carmina offers another example of this process, and here I’ve tried to show in bold the similar sounds used by Zukofsky in his translation:

Flavius—that delicate **lass**—to **Catullus**,
 Flavi, delicias tuas Catullo,
 if she **isn’t** simply **illicit inelegance**,
 ni sint illepidae atque inelegantes,
 ...
 rustle of **argument ambling** up and down.
 argutatio inambulatioque.
 Now about this that that is **you’ll say** nothing.
 nam nil ista ualet nihil tacere.
 Why? it shouldn’t **take** much to **foot** into the open
 cur? non tam latera ecfututa pandas,
 the slinking **backside**-before that you’re hiding.
 ni tu quid facias ineptiarum.
 I don’t **care** whether it’s sinful or holy,
 quare, quid quid habes boni malique,
do tell us. For I want **to take** you and that
 dic nobis. uolo te ac tuos amores
 love of yours and invoke you both to the skies.
 ad caelum lepido uocare uersu [16]

It did not matter to Zukofsky that his translation would prove difficult to the reader. He rather felt anger when the first critics of the work said that they did not understand what he was trying to do. The reactions were indeed strong as some readers even compared him to a Hun, a barbarian playing among the smoking ruins of Rome [17].

Zukofsky tried to keep the sound appearing in the original text, a feat that he managed by exploiting the Latin language’s influence over the English language [18] as in the translation for “*patrona uirgo*” or “*inelegantes*”. However, his refusal to render meaning from one language to the other goes far deeper. For Zukofsky, words linger and endure through the ages, they are testament to the permanence of human knowledge. Words are points of intensity which

guide the poet towards a larger comprehension of the culture in which he is immersed. As he confessed in his presentation of his project, his aim is to breathe some new life into Catullus' works. Zukofsky is working on a rejuvenation of his poems, something akin to metempsychosis. Through this work, Zukofsky expressed his deep-seated belief in the eternal return of things.

This specific practice of translation can be linked once again to mathematics and to physics. According to the OED, a translation is the "transference of a body, or form of energy, from one point of space to another". A "Motion or movement of translation" also refers to the "onward movement without (or considered apart from) rotation; sometimes as distinguished from a reciprocating movement as in a wave or vibration" (Simpson, 1989, 410). Checking more specialised sources, in mathematics, geometry can be divided between "classical geometry," which concentrates "on properties of figures constructed from points, lines, planes, circles, and spheres" and "transformational geometry, whose fundamental objects are points and transformations" (Smith, 2000, p. 227). Zukofsky's translations can be linked with this transformational geometry as

A transformation is a function that relates all points to others in a one-to-one way; it induces a correspondence between figures as well. You can use transformations to describe correspondences between various figures of classical geometry, to study positions of figures before and after motions, and to analyze the relationships between corresponding parts of symmetric figures. (Smith, 2000, p. 227)

Zukofsky proceeds to move one sound from the original Latin language to the English language, effectively engaging in an act of displacement, in the transfer of a body from one point of space to the other, from one point in time to the other, from antique Rome to modern United States. Combining music and mathematics, Zukofsky displaced a figure on the graph of culture, from the past to the present.

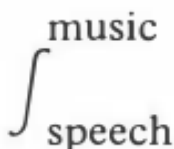
This combination of music and mathematics would find a logical yet surprising conclusion in Louis Zukofsky's long poem and in its last movement. As he worked toward the limits of poetry, he eventually worked toward his own limits as a poet.

Toward music

"A"'s 9th movement bears the mark of a deep shift in Zukofsky's interests as he comes back to the interests appearing in Cavalcanti's poem. The movement took ten years to complete as is shown in the table of contents: the first half was written between 1938 and 1940 and the second half was written between 1948 and 1950 (Zukofsky, 1978, p. v). The first lines of each half of the movement bear this mark: "An impulse to action sings of a semblance" versus "An eye to action sees love bear the semblance" (Zukofsky, 1978, pp. 107–108). Following the Second World War and the birth of his son, Paul, Zukofsky was no longer interested in the transcription of Marx's theory of values but was rather focused on family love, a theme "A"-12 will continue to build on.



Zukofsky suffers from a not entirely unfounded reputation of illegibility [19], and yet Zukofsky always insisted that simplicity was a key fixture of his poetry [20]. Likewise, he insisted that the entirety of Shakespeare's works could be summed up with the quotation: "Love looks not with the eyes but with the mind [21]". Here, this poem, inserted into a heart, is an expression of the author's renewed dedication to his family. In "A"-12, Zukofsky showcases his simplicity and the inspiration behind his poems and expressed his poetic principle:



The poet who has always been noted for his difficulty has been able to express with a confounding simplicity his governing poetic principle. The language used borrows once again from the language of mathematics. Translated into natural language, Zukofsky indicates that his poetry is comparable to an interval situated in the space between speech and music, that at times tends either to music or speech. But beyond these thematic insights, Zukofsky does not get rid of the structural principles that have always guided him throughout his career.

If mathematics is not as present as in his earlier poetry, especially in its structures, the musical principle of composition is still present and very much inform this specific movement. In the same manner as "A"-1 which began with "A / Round of fiddles playing Bach" (Zukofsky, 1978, p. 1), the twelfth movement begins with an allusion to a prelude composed by Bach that can be found in *The Orgelbüchlein*. The text – "founded on J. Camerarius's 'In tenebris nostrae'" (1546) (Williams, 2004, p. 310) – of the hymn states:

Whenever we are in the greatest distress
and do not know where to turn,
and find neither help nor advice,
although we worry day and night,
then is this our only comfort,
that all of us together
call on you, O true God,
for rescue from fear and distress... (Williams, 2004, p. 310)

Zukofsky transforms the first line of the hymn into “Out of deep need” (Scroggins, 2007, p. 245) [22]. The hymn emphasises the duress suffered by the faithful, while being also a hopeful cry and a call to action, the call for a return to God. But God’s solace is only accessible through the building of a community of faithful around their prayers, the solution to “the greatest distress” is the building of a community: “all of us together”. Quoting this hymn, Zukofsky underlines the fundamental role of family in his poem.

In the meantime, Zukofsky amplifies the religious atmosphere by retelling the tale of creation, making it also a discourse on poetic creation: “The creation – / A mist from the earth, / The whole face of the ground” (Zukofsky, 1978, p. 126). In Zukofsky’s mind, the act of creation is never separated from music and from the corporeal: “First body – to be seen and to pulse”; a “rhythm” that “breathed breath of life” (p. 126). Likewise, it is through the music of the world that we can see its harmony:

The order that rules music, the same
controls the placing of the stars and the feathers
in a bird's wing.
In the middle of harmony
Most heavenly music
For the universe is true enough. (Zukofsky, 1978, p. 126)

Taking the place of a god, Zukofsky gives primacy to music but also weaves various motifs in his text, including one really close to an old Jewish theme. Zukofsky talking about “First, glyph; then syllabary, / Then letters.” (Zukofsky, 1978, p. 126) is a nod to the Jewish legends related to the creation of the world:

Why was the world created with the letter bet: Just as bet is closed on three sides and open only in front, so you are not permitted to investigate what is above [the heavens] and what is below [the deep], what is before [the six days of creation] and what is [to happen] after [the world’s existence] – you are permitted only from the time the world was created and thereafter [the world we live in]. (Bialik et al., 1992, p. 6)

This tale, part of Jewish folklore, indicates that the letters of the Hebrew alphabet each pleaded for the honour of being the first to appear in the Torah, which fell on the letter *bet*, as it is the first letter of the word *bereshit* which opens the Torah [23]. A tale that Zukofsky seems to allude directly to: “In Hebrew ‘In the beginning’ / Means literally from the head?” (Zukofsky, 1978, p. 142).

This sudden focus on letters brings also to the front the structural principle behind this movement as it is centred around four motifs all represented by the different letters composing Bach’s name and making use of the German names of notes – B corresponding to B flat in the English system, A to A, C to C, and H to B.

Blest
Ardent good,
Celia, speak simply, rarely scarce, seldom —

Happy, immeasurable love
 heart or head's greater part unhurt and happy,
 things that bear harmony
 certain in concord with reason (Zukofsky, 1978, p. 127).

Through the conjoined use of the notes, forming Bach's name and making direct allusions to the members of his family, Zukofsky centres around this happiness, derived from the immeasurable love that he felt for his family. Throughout the movement, Zukofsky alludes and dedicates the poem "To Celia" (Zukofsky, 1978, p. 130).

The theme of family life is also expanded through the allusion to the experience of a migrant coming to America. Zukofsky regularly talks about the experience of his father, insisting on the fact that Paul bears the name of his grandfather because he considered that his father was exemplary: "Everybody loved Reb Pinchos / Because he loved everybody / Simple" (154). The allusions flourish throughout this movement with regular recalls to the expression of his poetic principle: "As I love: / my poetics" (Zukofsky, 1978, p. 151). Finally, "A"-12 ends on the expression of an enduring love for the poet's wife, on the vision of a "Blest / Ardent / Celia / Unhurt and happy" (Zukofsky, 1978, p. 261). The regular reminders that family is at the centre of his poetry and the regular dedication offered to his wife – as well as the regular appearances of his son Paul – lead to the creation of a little private music.

If Zukofsky always considered music as the objective toward which he would have to tend, he never had any formal education on the subject. He always felt the utmost admiration for his prodigy son, who could be considered as the link between music and family. As it is, he always had to rely on his wife, Celia, to read music. They met each other as they worked at the same place. Seeing her read *In the American Grain*, he nonchalantly dropped a copy of his own poems. As she told him that she had discerned an underlying musical structure in his poems, this marked the beginning of their relationship (Scroggins, 2007, p. 141).

Beyond copying her husband's poems in order to prepare them for publication, Celia Thaew – her maiden name – gained an increasing importance in Louis Zukofsky's work. Her influence was first external as she first put Shakespeare's play *Pericles* to music, Zukofsky was impressed by his wife's work and made numerous allusions to her work; as in *Bottom: On Shakespeare*, where he indicates that part two of his work constitutes "notes for Her music to Pericles and for a graph of culture" (Zukofsky, 2002, p. 33). The part was written after Celia had finished working on her setting into music of the play. Louis Zukofsky, in this development, wanted to emphasise that there is a difference between what is written and what is sounded, through the use of the quotation from *Antony & Cleopatra* (act IV, scene 7).

Scarus: I had a wound here that was like a T,
 But now 'tis made an H. (Zukofsky et al., 2002, p. 33).

Read silently – like a modern reader of poetry might do – Scarus' lines don't make much sense, it is only when the verse is read out loud or performed by an actor, that Shakespeare's

inventiveness surfaces. Shakespeare plays on the homophony of the letter H and the word ache pronounced “aitch” (Shakespeare, 1997, p. 2685). But Zukofsky is not entirely interested in the sound as, for him, the Shakespearean text is multi-dimensional:

But because it is upper-case with a reason that cannot altogether dispel bodies, it also helplessly calls up to itself the momentous eye—to which sound, smell, taste and touch are reciprocal incident—the implication of seeing that alone strengthens Her as present object. (Zukofsky, 2002, p. 33)

Sound and text are deeply linked, each bringing another dimension to what Shakespeare wrote, and sound conjuring the presence of his wife – “Her”. But what is also interesting in this passage is the use of the adjective “happy” which comes as a reminiscence of the passage quoted previously from “A”-12 where Celia was the precursor to the happiness felt by the poet.

Celia Zukofsky’s love of music, her will to transcribe, to put into music the work of another poet was highly significant to Zukofsky. At some point, she decided to put her husband’s work into music, creating a work called *L.Z. Masque*. If at first, she decided to do it privately, she was encouraged by her husband to publish and to perform what was to become “A”-24. But, whereas *Pericles* was an original composition by Celia, here in the case of the 24th movement, she decided to use Handel’s *Harpsichord pieces*.

The choice of Handel might be surprising considering her husband’s obsession for Bach. It was made at the suggestion of Paul: “Thanks to Paul Zukofsky for suggestions regarding typography and for the loan of his copy of Handel's *Pièces pour le Clavecin* as printed for The German Handel Society” (Zukofsky, 1978, p. 806). However, Handel still appears in “A” (at least five times), and once in relation to Bach at the end of the 23rd movement: “A living calendar, names inwreath’d / Bach’s innocence longing Handel’s untouched” (Zukofsky, 1978, p. 562).

“A”-24 is divided into two acts, with the first act counting five scenes and the second four scenes. The whole movement uses different pieces for the harpsichord composed by Handel: all using different musical forms, from the Prelude to the Passacaille, through Fugues. And, added to Handel’s *Harpsichord pieces*, are excerpts from all of Zukofsky’s works, each line labeled according to the genre of the writing. One line is dedicated to “Thought” – noted T – which is to mean the theoretical works written by the poet; one line is dedicated to “Drama” – noted D –; one line is dedicated to “Story” – noted “S” – and a line dedicated to his poetry – noted P for poem.

In reusing Handel’s scores, Celia was not entirely faithful to them. For example, in the third scene of the first act, Celia Zukofsky does use the complete section starting from the “Allemande” but she repeats the motifs when she feels the need to: at the end of the ninth bar, instead of continuing the piece, she goes back to the beginning, starting from the “Allemande” section.

Each line taken from Zukofsky's works, superimposed on the score by Handel, functions as a voice. From a work originally created only for keyboard – the Gesellschaft edition does indeed indicate that it is compiling “*klavierstücke*,” “keyboard pieces” – Celia Thaew transforms it into a choral work emphasising the most important thematic aspects of her husband's poetry and works.

T: The sound and pitch emphasis
 D: take a seat? Not rushing! What's on Doctor?
 (hurries over)
 S: subdued tones to her sister-in-law, hardly a sign of
 P: were it forecast to him/ ... (Zukofsky, 1978, p.
 575)

If the choice of Handel might seem surprising considering Zukofsky's admiration for J. S. Bach, it still makes sense as the suites were “one of the best known collections of harpsichord music of the eighteenth century” (Burrows, 1997, p. 220). Both the content of the pieces and their virtuosity certainly were certainly appealing to Zukofsky: “Its contents show Handel's originality and independence of mind, and his gift for drawing on different musical influences and unifying them by the power of his genius; the technical difficulty of many of the pieces (stretches of a tenth are common) is proof of his own proficiency at the keyboard” (Burrows, 1997, p. 220). But beyond this virtuosity and its musical interest, Handel's choice is also the expression of love, this time not from the husband, but from the wife: Handel's “harpsichord music was no doubt composed for his own pleasure, the enjoyment of his friends and the instruction of his pupils” (208). Celia writing *L.Z. Masque* on airs by Handel comes then as a gift, the expression of family love, a musical offering, reflecting on her husband's unfaltering will to reflect on his art.

Coda

In the wake of the modernist experiments which tried to redefine the poetic genre, Louis Zukofsky spent his whole life and career in search of a new poetic form. He first turned to mathematics before finally settling down for music. His insistence on the link between music and poetry are his answers to the questions on the nature of poetry. The inclusion of his wife's *L.Z. Masque* as “A”'s final movement comes as the logical conclusion of this constant questioning, of pushing poetry toward its limits. By superimposing excerpts taken from every work written by her husband, and by writing a choral work in which no voice could claim superiority on the others, Celia and Louis Zukofsky effectively created a work that blurred the frontiers between genres.

The piece's original title, *L.Z. Masque*, refers to a kind of show originating in Renaissance Italy and which was quite successful in England.

The character of such productions took form in Italy when masked and ornately costumed figures presented as mythological or allegorical beings entered a noble hall or royal court, singing and dancing, complimenting their hosts and, in the course of the

entertainment, calling upon the spectators to join them in dancing. (Preminger & Brogan, 1993, p. 738)

Celia Zukofsky's work quite obviously makes use of the genre's transmediality but it is also possible to interpret the title literally. The use of her husband's initials contributes to a dissimulation further underlined by the use of the word "masque". The genre derives its name from the practice of the players and actors who appeared masked on stage. The title then, beyond the homage, indicates that the poet's wife puts on her husband's face to produce a new work. Louis Zukofsky's decision to include Celia's work then seems to show his will to question not only the limits of poetry but also his own identity as a poet.

Notes

- [1] Zukofsky held a grudge for most of his career against this term that he himself picked. He felt that this article obscured his own poetic travail and shed some light on different poets with which he did not want to be associated. For more details on the subject, see especially Dembo's interview of Zukofsky in (Terrell, 1979, p. 265-266).
- [2] The essays written by Zukofsky during his time working in the Federal Writers Project are collected in a book titled by the editors *A Useful Art* (Zukofsky, 2003).
- [3] An anecdote of Zukofsky's childhood is revelatory of this complex relationship with the English language. Zukofsky learned by heart the Yiddish version of the poem "Hiawatha" by Longfellow: "My first exposure to letters at the age of four was thru the Yiddish theatres, most memorably The Thalia on the Bowery. By the age of nine I had seen a good deal of Shakespeare, Ibsen, Strindberg, and Tolstoy performed – all in Yiddish. Even Longfellow's "Hiawatha" was read by me in Yiddish, as well Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*. My first exposure to English was, to be exact, P.S. 7 on Christie and Hester Streets. By eleven I was writing poetry in English, as yet not "American English," tho I found Keats rather difficult as compared with Shelley's "Men of England" and Burns' "Scots, wha hae". (Zukofsky, 1970)
- [4] The most famous of which is his use of the Arthurian myth to talk about a possible rejuvenation of the land: "At this point, as Kenner has pointed out, the motifs of the Grail legend began to take possession of Eliot's imagination, and perhaps these motifs proved a greater aid to composition, than the model of eighteenth-century satire that Eliot had been using" (Dickie, 1986, p. 24).
- [5] Zukofsky wrote his poem "Mantis" in the form of the sestina, a heavily constrained type of poetry.
- [6] Which will form the basis for the reproach made by William Carlos Williams who wrote *In the American Grain* as a response to Eliot's poem which he calls "the great catastrophe to our letters" (Williams quoted in Aji, 2004, p. 23). The Rutherford poet felt that Eliot had refused to face the American spirit and write a proper American poem, while Williams pleaded for the establishment of a tradition which "should have its foundations in America" (Aji, 2004, p. 23, my translation).
- [7] An expression used by Zukofsky himself, in his correspondence with Pound: "Yes, as far as I'm concerned right now "A" will be <a> life-work" (Pound & Zukofsky, 1987, p. 78).
- [8] Margaret Dickie argues that the long poem was the defining form of the modernist era, which all the authors she studies failed to accomplish as the poems' "narratives of composition ... reveal the tenacity of intention, the poet's enigmatic persistence against

all odds toward the impossible poem, the unrelenting struggle with despair and failure to create and succeed” (Dickie, 1986, p. 4).

- [9] A not so innocent choice as Pound expressed his enduring admiration for Cavalcanti's poem, praising “the suavity of a song, with the neatness of scalpel-cut” (Pound, 1968, p. 159).
- [10] “As the semester wore on, Zukofsky found Wisconsin no more hospitable. He found it hard to adjust to the faculty's midwestern mores – ‘They're so genial that when a guy's quiet they think he's arrogant’ – and the members of the English department seemed to fear that he was teaching over his students' heads” (Scroggins, 2007, p. 116).
- [11] Coincidentally, Zukofsky was always interested and fascinated with the writings of Spinoza and more specifically with his mode of exposition. The articulation and development of his thoughts through “definitions,” “axioms” and “propositions” visible for example *René Descartes' The Principles of Philosophy demonstrated in the geometric manner* (De Spinoza, 2002, p. 115) proved an enduring model for the poet. Spinoza's influence is also visible as Zukofsky “incorporated into the language of “A”-11 the vocabulary of Henry James, Paracelsus, and Spinoza, so that a poem that records the history of his own family evokes as part of that history the worlds of these previous writers: a sort of intertextuality in which Zukofsky puns James puns Paracelsus puns Spinoza, and the alert reader realizes for her-or himself the history that is present in the language” (Quartermain, 1992, p. 112).
- [12] This is something that will be used by Zukofsky in the later years of his career, especially in *80 Flowers*, as his poems will use the constraint of the number of words to give a form to the poem (Lang, 2018). See also in “A”:
- One single number should determine our life: 1.
Greater has no peace or rest,
A calculator counts further
Who can say at what number he stops?
This question gnaws Paracelsus. (Zukofsky, 1978, p. 172).
- [13] Excluding “First Half of “A”-9” where Zukofsky states again his purpose: “[...] the first 70 lines are the poetic analog of a conic section—i.e. the ratio of the accelerations of two sounds (r,n) has been made equal to the ratio of the accelerations of the coordinates (x,y) of a particle moving in a circular path with uniform angular velocity, i.e. values of

$$\frac{\frac{d^2y}{dt^2}}{\frac{d^2x}{dt^2}} = \tan \Theta \text{ where } \Theta = \arctan y/x$$

are noted for five symmetrically located points. The time unit in the poetry is defined by 7 eleven-syllable lines. Each point is represented by a strophe. Mr. Jerry Reisman is responsible for this part of the ‘form’” (Zukofsky, 1940 in Twitchell-Waas, n.d.).

- [14] In order to underline the process used by Zukofsky, I've superimposed the version by Zukofsky and the original version.
- [15] (Zukofsky, 2011, p. 245) and (Catullus, 2005, p. 44).
- [16] (Zukofsky, 2011, pp. 247–248) and (Catullus, 2005, p. 51).
- [17] For more detailed examples, see (Scroggins, 2007, p. 369).
- [18] Following the Norman invasion, “The third major foreign influence upon English lexis throughout its history is Latin. As the language not only of the internal organisation and liturgy of the medieval Church, but also of scholarship until modern times, it has been continuous in its effect, although fluctuating in its intensity” (Hogg et al., 1992, p. 432).

- [19] “A”-9 is the subject of a whole chapter by Vincent Bucher in *Modernism and Unreadability*, where the author tries to “demonstrate that illegibility can offer a productive, alternative frame of reading” (Bucher, V., 2011, p. 90).
- [20] “They say my poetry is difficult. I don’t know – I try to be as simple as possible” (Dembo, 1979, p. 268).
- [21] “These formal qualities of Shakespeare’s words that embody a definition of love run into lines and entire poems. They overflow into characters and plays that are extended illustrations of the same verbal perception and preoccupation. Since the poetics of the writing self-confessedly groups ‘The lunatic, the lover, and the poet,’ it turns with unavoidable insistence to the idea that ‘Love looks not with the eyes but with the mind [...]’” (Zukofsky, 2002, p. 18)
- [22] For detailed information on the hymn and its use by Zukofsky, see Twitchell-Waas, J. (n.d.) and Hatlen, B. (1997).
- [23] “After the claims of all these letters had been disposed of, Bet stepped before the Holy One, blessed be He, and pleaded before Him: “O Lord of the world! May it be Thy will to create Thy world through me, seeing that all the dwellers in the world give praise daily unto Thee through me, as it is said, ‘Blessed be the Lord forever. Amen, and Amen.’” The Holy One, blessed be He, at once granted the petition of Bet. He said, “Blessed be he that cometh in the name of the Lord.” And He created His world through Bet, as it is said, ‘Bereshit God created the heaven and the earth.’” (Ginzberg et al., 2003, p. 4)

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