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THE INTRATEXTUAL OBSCURITY
OF LOUIS ZUKOFSKY'S *"A"*

Abstract

Louis Zukofsky's late poetry in the book *"A"* constitutes a kind of "intratext," a poem that resides between two languages, dependent on a source text, but representing an original work on the part of the author. The bilingual character of the poem is not a translation, which traditionally emphasizes the carrying over of the sense of the original into the target language at the expense of sound, style and other poetic effects; rather Zukofsky emphasizes sound and style at the expense of a literal rendition. This compositional strategy creates a special kind of literary difficulty that is not merely allusive of other works of literature, but a deliberate obscurity that appropriates and reconstitutes its source texts in the pursuit of an idiosyncratic linguistic beauty.

In his discussion of the crisis of audience for modern poetry, the critic Vernon Shetley proposes "a distinction between *obscurity* and *difficulty*, using the former term to refer to those elements of language that resist easy semantic processing, and the latter for the reader's response to those elements. Obscurity refers to features within a text, such as allusion, syntactical dislocations, and figurative substitutions, while difficulty refers to something that occurs between reader and text, one kind of possible response to textual obscurity. Because obscure texts demand that readers supply information not available in the work itself, the degree to which readers can negotiate such texts depends on the knowledge, skills and presuppositions they bring with them to the poem" (1993: 5–6). I concur with Shetley's distinction, to the extent that "obscurity" would be regarded as a function of the poet's compositional method and "difficulty" as a function of the reader's apprehension. One can argue that such a relationship between poet and reader is endemic to poetry. Roman Jakobson proposes in "Linguistics and Poetics" (1960) that "the set (*Einstellung*) toward the message as such, focus on the message for its own sake, is the POETIC function of language" (1987: 69). The poem's emphasis on its own utterance has always created difficulty for the reader. The poetic function would be in opposition to, in Jakobson's terms, "a set (*Einstellung*) toward the referent, an orientation toward the context — briefly, the so-called REFERENTIAL, 'denotative,' 'cognitive' function" (1987: 66) that is the main task of informational messages in which the addressee's error-free comprehension is very much sought.

But I believe it's necessary to make a further investigation of the different modes of obscurity in twentieth-century poetry. Shetley's list of textual features such as allusion, fragmentation, and figurative language, that can create difficulty for the reader describe the modernist poetics of Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, and W. B. Yeats and the New Critical techniques of close reading. There is an assumption, however, among modernist poets and critics that the "obscurity" of the poetry would respond to the hermeneutic enterprise; that an irascible or intractable text would reveal its argument and referential context with effort from the well-educated and well-prepared reader. To misquote Mina Loy's "Songs to Joannes," which qualifies as a work of modernist difficulty, the reader must be diligently engaged in "sifting the appraisable" (1996: 53).[1] Shetley observes that the reader must supply some missing information to complete the communicative transaction: familiarity with Jessie L. Weston's *From Ritual to Romance* or Sir James Fraser's *The Golden Bough* becomes essential to a reading of "The Waste Land"; and knowledge of the ethics of Confucius or the letters of Sigismundo Malatesta enhance a reader's appreciation of *The Cantos*.

The penultimate sections of Louis Zukofsky's epic poem *"A"*, however, are poems whose obscurity does not rely on a system of complex allusiveness. Each poem resists an easy semantic processing in its own way, and yet the reader has no apparent recourse to "intertextual" sources or other missing information that would facilitate a greater apprehension. The critic is virtually absolved of the hermeneutic function; the poems can be discussed, but explication of the texts does not contribute measurably to their appreciation. These poems are representatives of a postmodern poetics of the "materiality" of the word. They are intensive, possibly extreme, examples of Jakobson's definition of the poetic function as the "set toward the message." I want to distinguish the obscurity of the late work of Zukofsky from the allusive but recoverable complexities of modernist poetry. I also want to assert that the poetic texture and compositional method of the latter sections of *"A"* (written between 1967 and 1974) differ in kind from the modernist poetry of the first half of the twentieth century. By poetic texture I refer to the quality of those materials that in their joining comprise the text of the poem. By compositional method I mean the manner in which the poet handles the materials of the poem. For the moment let us say that the final movements of Zukofsky's *"A"* represent a mode of densely bilingual and "intratextual" obscurity that is not so much allusive of other works of literature but rather appropriates and reconstitutes its literary source materials.

Louis Zukofsky (1904–78) was born in New York City's Lower East Side to Lithuanian Jewish parents who had immigrated to the United States, speaking no English, only a few years before the poet's birth. As a precocious boy, Zukofsky frequented the Yiddish theaters of the Bowery, where he saw productions of Shakespeare, Ibsen, Strindberg and Tolstoy, performed not in their original language but in Yiddish translations. It's not surprising that, given his early exposure to great works of literature transposed into another language, the bilingual Zukofsky (who only acquired English when he attended public school) would incorporate into his poetics different methods

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[1] Loy remarks in a letter to Carl Van Vechten that she was disturbed by the printer's errors in the first appearance of "Songs to Joannes" in *Others* (July 1915), such as "'Sitting the appraisable' instead of silting the appraisable." See Loy's *The Lost Lunar Baedeker*, ed. Roger L. Conover (1996: 188–91). I read "sifting" as yet another plausible misconstruction of the line that yields meaning. It would be easy to misprint the "t" as an "f" in "sitting," which produces a self-referential commentary on the hermeneutic process of the reader.

of translation. His life's work, the long poem in twenty-four movements, *"A"*, written between 1928 and 1974, contains several investigations into the nature of language, linguistics and translation. Zukofsky's *"A"*-21 is among the more difficult movements of his poem. Seventy pages long, it is a rather unique form of translation, based on the Latin text of the comedy *Rudens*, or *The Rope*, by the Roman playwright Plautus (254–184 BC). My introduction to the poetry of Louis Zukofsky came in a Latin seminar devoted to the translation of Catullus. The collaborative translation of Celia and Louis Zukofsky of the complete Catullus was hotly debated, and not without derision among the classicists as I recall, for its employment of a homophonic method, in which the sound, rhythm, and syntax of the original Latin verse is reconstituted in an idiosyncratic English diction, at the expense, or at the betrayal, of sense.[2] *"A"*-21 is not strictly a homophonic translation of Plautus's Latin. Unlike his attempt to provide a sonic correlative in English for each syllable of Catullus's Latin, Zukofsky renders Plautus's lines of varying meter for spoken dialogue, recitative, and lyric into an invariable five-word line. As Burton Hatlen has said, "Zukofsky has here created a new kind of poetic line. Earlier poets counted accents or syllables; Zukofsky has decided to count words" (1979: 357). This five-word line, continued as a practice in *"A"*-22 and -23 as well as in his final book of poems, *80 Flowers*, represents a significant contribution to postmodern poetics and the end-game of Zukofsky's oeuvre. In comparing the Latin original to Zukofsky's poetry, one still notes a strong emulation of Latin word order, a preponderance of Latinate diction, and certain parallels in the music of the language. He limits his translation of the play to the same number of lines as the original, with the addition of several asides, or "*Voice off*s," that offer commentary devoted more to the process of composition than to the action of the play. Zukofsky's choices with regard to lineation contribute to a poetic texture of compression. Plautus has the relative luxury of indicating the syntactical function of his Latin words through inflection—modifying the endings of nouns, verbs, and adjectives—whereas English requires position and auxiliary words to establish grammatical and syntactical relations. Conventional translations of Latin into English usually increase the number of words required to convey the sense of the original; Zukofsky's text reduces the total verbiage needed to translate Plautus's *Rudens* in an equivalent number of lines. *"A"*-21 is obviously not an attempt at a literal translation of Plautus, but it does not aspire to nonsense either. It gathers into a compressed and densely textured line much of the emotive and linguistic force of Plautus's comedy, while avoiding the common translator's compulsion to provide equivalent semantic iterations.

Such density of language creates difficulty for the reader, whether they are familiar with Plautus's *Rudens* or not. There isn't time here to reopen the debate over the value of the Zukofskys' strategy of homophonic transliteration. But I want to draw our attention to one particular aspect of their work that speaks to the issue of compositional texture. A note on their method of work, generously provided by Hatlen from a personal communication with Celia, reveals that she copied each line of the Catullus in Latin, parsed it, and then "wrote the literal meaning or meanings of every word indicating gender, number, case and the order or sentence structure" (1979:

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[2] The "Translator's Preface" to the Zukofskys' *Catullus* claims, "This translation of Catullus follows the sound, rhythm, and syntax of his Latin — tries, as is said, to breathe the 'literal' meaning with him" (1969: n.p.).

347). In effect Celia was producing an interlinear translation, or what schoolboys and girls used to refer to as a "crib," prior to the composition of "good poetry" in English by Louis. A comparable instance of interlinear translation would be Pound's reliance on the notebooks of Ernest Fenellosa to produce his translation of the Chinese (which he could not read) in *Cathay* (1915).[3] The use of "cribs," usually produced by a native speaker of the source language, is a common and acceptable method for translation—especially of poetry—into a target language when the poet-translator is not fluent in the source language. In general one dispenses with the "crib" text—or consigns it to the archives — when the finished translation is published. *"A"*-21 again represents a special case. Zukofsky relied on the translation of Plautus's *Rudens* by Paul Nixon in the Loeb Classical Library series.[4] Such a conservative, idiomatic prose translation would hardly constitute a "crib," but I would argue that it remains as a kind of "intratext" that cannot be expunged by either author or reader. Unlike the more familiar allusiveness of intertextuality in which portions of another work or works are inserted into the site of composition — Zukofsky's "Poem beginning 'The'" (1927) would be an example of such intertextuality taken to the *n*th degree, in which virtually the entire body of text is a collage of appropriation — intratextuality refers to the continuous presence of texts within texts without resorting to direct citations. The fact that Zukofsky chose to title *"A"*-21 *Rudens* and not *The Rope* is an indication that he did not rightly view his poem as a translation with an ancillary relationship to Plautus's original. Barry Ahearn suggests "thinking of Plautus's drama as a template" for *"A"*-21: "Zukofsky works from that mode, manufacturing variations, arabesques, jokes, and strained readings not present in the Latin—but extractable from it" (1983: 176).

Zukofsky's *Rudens* retains the dramatic apparatus of Plautus's comedy: the Prologue with its acrostic summary of the plot; the dramatis personae, transliterated into low-brow character names; the act and scene divisions; and the identification of each character's lines are all carefully noted in the text of *"A"*-21. It seems incontrovertible that Zukofsky wished the reader to be aware of the dramatic form and source of the poem. But I'll make the slightly riskier assertion that the obscurity of Zukofsky's poetry is intended to make the reader comparatively aware of both the original Latin poetry and a more literal translation. Even a reader with little or no Latin will appreciate some of the music of Plautus's poetry; and the difficulty of the poem sends the reader in search of paraphrase and plot synopsis in order to confirm some sense of dramatic action. Zukofsky's *Rudens* is therefore an "intratext," a poem of its own high order, and yet which always stands as a continuous presence in or between other texts. The compositional method of *"A"*-21 as a "paratranslation" that always stands between Plautus's Latin and a literal understanding of it results in a poetry of highly compressed striation and dense obscurity. Such striation reminds one of nothing more than layers at the site of an archaeological dig. It's worth pointing out that Plautus's play was itself adapted from a Greek source of unknown title by the poet Diphilus and was in turn a significant source for Shakespeare's *The Tempest*.

A brief passage from Act II, Scene 5 in which Scape (for Sceparnio, the slave) fetches water from the well for the lovable Amabel (Ampelisca), a notable gesture in

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[3] Hugh Kenner provides a detailed description of Pound's use of the Fenellosa glosses on Chinese poetry for his composition of *Cathay* in "The Invention of China," *The Pound Era* (1971: 192–222).

[4] See Ahearn 176.

a play of near drownings and shipwrecks, can serve as the site of comparison. First twelve lines from Zukofsky:

> Prodigal immortals, I believe water
> *is* voluptuous. Love's traction hauled:
> deep was the well speeding
> my work. Pride don't sin —
> but love is cocky today!
> Here's your water, little belle.
> Carry it honest like me.
> Delectable — water — Where are you!
> My she loves me! Hiding,
> love? Taking your pitcherful? Where —
> you're not timid — are you? Gentility?
> Hercules leaves me. Deluded me.

> *("A"* 1978: 456)

And the same twelve lines from Sceparnio's monologue, in the iambic senarius [six-beat] meter of Plautus:

> Pro di inmortales, in aqua numquam credidi
> voluptatem inesse tantam. Ut hanc traxi lubens.
> Nimio minus altus puteus visust quam prius.
> Ut sine labore hanc extraxi! Praefiscine!
> Satin nequam sum, ut pote qui hodie amare inceperim?
> Em tibi aquam, mea tu belliata. Em sic volo
> te ferre honeste, ut ego fero, ut placeas mihi.
> Sed ubi tu es, delicata? Cape aquam hanc sis. Ubi es?
> Amat hercle me, ut ego opinor. Delituit mala.
> Ubi tu es? Etiamne hanc urnam acceptura es? Ubi es?
> Commodule ludis. Tandem vero serio,
> etiam acceptura es urnam hanc? Ubi tu es gentium?

> (Nixon 1965: II. v. 458–69)

Although the stage action of Zukofsky's version is difficult to discern, it captures more of the spirit of the flirtatious poseur than most literal translations. There's a fair amount of punning and double-entendre in Plautine comedy. Zukofsky makes bilingual punning the dominant compositional device of *"A"*-21: "Ut hanc traxi lubens" [What fun it was to draw this (water) up] becomes "Love's traction hauled." Though Scape *is* hauling water from the well in his jug, his mind's set on having his "ashes hauled" (in the popular expression) and that makes his job proceed lubriciously. Pound used bilingual puns sparingly in "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley" and "Homage to Sextus Propertius," as when he laments "O bright Apollo, / τιν ανδρα, τιν ηρωα, τινα θεον, / What god, man, or hero / Shall I place a tin wreath upon!" (1971: 189). But where Pound offers a literal translation of Pindar's Greek, Zukofsky's transliterations ("traxi" / "traction") often pulls the text away from its original semantic value.

In addition to the use of intratextuality, Zukofsky employs a variety of literary constraints in his work. Most constraints have the effect of compression on poetic

language, which is the case in the shorter poems from "Poem Beginning 'The'" to *80 Flowers*, *Thanks to the Dictionary*,[5] and throughout *"A"*. But one observes a shift in the strategy with which Zukofsky undertakes a literary form from the earlier works to the later, in keeping with the general shift from a modernist to a postmodern poetics. The first half of *"A"*-9 involves a complex mathematical formula suggesting the calculus of a curve for the distribution of the letters *n* and *r* in the text. Such a mathematical constraint on composition anticipates by three decades the similar formulaic textual experiments of the OULIPO group in Paris. In Ahearn's opinion, "If Zukofsky had not chosen to reveal the mathematical aspect of *"A"*, decades might have passed before someone stumbled across the secret" (1983: 235). Such a constraint is "hidden," not readily apparent to the reader, although the allusions in the text of *"A"*-9 to Marx's *Capital* would have been easily recognizable in 1938. Later in his career, Zukofsky adopts a simpler mathematical constraint for *"A"*-22: a five-word line and a thousand-line limit to the poem. Such counting devices place far less restraint on the poet and are readily "apparent" to the reader. Nevertheless, the copious transliteration of sources from the Greek and Hebrew in *"A"*-23 are essentially opaque to the reader who does not have access to the Zukofsky archive. The shift in compositional method and texture between *"A"*-9 and the later works represents a shift between the modernist esthetics of "difficulty" and a postmodern esthetics of "obscurity." In an esthetics of difficulty, the reader has enough information embedded in the text — or clues to the location of intertextual references — to construct a reasonable if labored interpretation; the compositional method by which the poet arrived at this texture of difficulty is not essential for the reader's understanding of the poem. But in an esthetics of obscurity, techniques of textual decomposition, recombination, condensation, or appropriation are easily recognizable *as techniques* by the reader, but the resultant text in almost any passage are extremely resistant to semantic processing. Comparable examples of such texts would include John Cage's mesostic texts such as *ROARATORIO* or Jackson MacLow's *Forties*.

Zukofsky's poetics of compression have been remarkably annotated and elucidated by Michele Leggott in *Reading Zukofsky's 80 Flowers* (1989). What becomes clear, if anything does, is that these poems are not "language games," playful verbal gestures of uncertain import. Zukofsky compresses both his language and his thought, the poetic line and an essential body of knowledge drawn from the sciences, mathematics, politics, economics, and literature. Constructed like a column with a base and capital of twenty five-line stanzas and an elongated verse paragraph as the shaft or "scape" (*"A"* 1978: 508), *"A"*-22 takes its place on the portico of a Temple of Knowledge. This one movement comprises an allegorical frieze decorating a temple in honor of the natural sciences — geology, geography, physiology, anthropology, geometry, astronomy, and botany. It is dedicated to "restoring song / under scholia — 'a school-master physicist'" (*"A"* 1978: 522), a role that Zukofsky might have played at the Brooklyn Polytechnic Institute. Like the mosaic on the vaulted ceiling of the Jefferson building of the Library of Congress — and other monumental edifices dedicated to the mind — that pays homage to each discipline of the arts and sciences, Zukofsky's *"A"* is, in its own words:

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[5] For a discussion of procedural composition in Zukofsky's prose, see Peter Quartermain, "Writing Authority in Zukofsky's *Thanks to the Dictionary*," in Mark Scroggins, ed. *Upper Limit Music* (1997: 154–74).

library, harbor beacon: the mind
does not light of itself;
stripped to the mediated object
eyes, lights, out there here,
itself all ever, increate, seedless —
yoke fruits other, framing watercourse
brimming obstacle running by itself.
Temple altar light unextinguished *yes*,
sleep waylaid, mused more hours,
in a fire of coals —
bread: their past 5000 years
not duped by studied words [.]

<div align="center">(<i>"A"</i> 1978: 523)</div>

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