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**PLAYING THE NUMBERS:
THE FRENCH RECEPTION OF LOUIS ZUKOFSKY**

Marjorie Perloff

--Like the oceans, or the leaves of fine Southern
palm, we must appear numbered
to you, like the tides. . . .

Louis Zukofsky, *Twenty-nine Poems*, #25

--Comme les oceans, où les feuilles des beaux palmiers
du sud, nous devons te sembler
nombres, comme les marées. . . .

Jacques Roubaud, *29 Poèmes*, 25¹

“We must appear numbered”: Zukofsky’s words point to his lifelong concern with mathematical form—a concern that connects his own poetry to that of the French *Oulipo*, one of whose leading members, the poet-mathematician Jacques Roubaud, has been a frequent Zukofsky translator. But “we must appear numbered” (“nous devons te sembler nombres”) can be taken more personally: it also refers, I think, to the poet’s consuming desire to be counted, to matter in the face of the neglect he met during his lifetime. Indeed, as book sales and curricula attest, Zukofsky remains relatively obscure even today.

In France, on the other hand, Zukofsky’s reputation was established in the early ‘70s—at least in the more avant-garde poetry circles—as a poet who demonstrated that formal innovation and a radical politics need not be at odds. Thus Roubaud’s translation of some two dozen Zukofsky poems in the special Objectivist issue of *Europe* (1977-78) opens with a headnote that

calls Zukofsky as, "Without a doubt, together with Pound, the most important American poet of our time" ("Sans doute, avec Pound, le poète américain le plus important de notre temps" 78). Journals like *Action poétique*, *Europe*, *Poésie*, *Fin*, and *Java* have published translations of and essays on the Objectivists, and the late eighties even gave birth to a little broadside journal named *Zuk*, which published, side by side, American language poets and their French counterparts.

In the Introduction to his *Toward a New Poetics* (1994), Serge Gavronsky discusses the links between Zukofsky and such well-known poets as Joseph Guglielmi, Emmanuel Hocquard, Claude Royet-Journoud, Jean Frémon, Pierre Alféri, Gavronsky himself, and perhaps most notably Anne-Marie Albiach, who translated, among other Zukofsky texts, the first half of "A"-9, a translation included in the bilingual Gallimard edition *Vingt poètes américains*, edited by Roubaud and Michel Deguy.² Indeed, Albiach's 1971 lyric sequence *Etat* is structured around citations from her French version of "A"-9—a tour de force, given its complex assemblage of statements from Marx's *Kapital* and Herbert Stanley Allen's *Electrons and Waves*, worked into the grid of Cavalcanti's double canzone "Donna mi Priegha." The words of Marx and Allen impose formidable constraints on Cavalcanti's rhymes so that, in Peter Quartermain's words, "the abstract (like the word 'value', for instance) becomes concrete, specific, in the activity—the action—the labour, which the form of the song embodies and which the form of the song calls forth in the reader: concentrated thought."³ It is this *embodiment* of abstraction, so Albiach herself tells an interviewer, that she derived from Zukofsky. As she puts it, her own poetics follows "A"-9 in holding that "the body must try to coincide with the origin of its own image" (*Le corps doit tenter de coïncider avec l'origine de sa propre image*).⁴

But a reading of *Etat*—indeed a reading of any of Albiach's books of poetry-- makes one wonder if her comment is not best understood as an

anxiety of influence. Consider the following page (Albiach's prosodic unit is always the page rather than the stanza or line) that opens Part IV of *Etat*:⁵

EXERGUE

l'imprécisable
l'inépuisable roman

d'une situation

l a p l u i e a e u c e t t e c o u l e u r

le corps qui prend
de savoir
les poses

élucidation

In Keith Waldrop's excellent translation, this becomes:

EPIGRAPH

the unspecifiable
the inexhaustible novel

of a situation

t h e r a i n h a d t h a t c o l o r

body caught
by knowing
the exposures

elucidation

Superficially, this may look like one of Zukofsky's short poems, but despite its abstraction and the non-sequitur of line breaks, as when "l'inépuisable roman" is followed, surprisingly, by "d'une situation," Albiach's indeterminacies carry an emotional weight one doesn't find in Zukofsky. "The rain had that colour," we read in a line whose letters are separated by double spaces, so that our focus is on the letter as such. How can rain have color and what color is it? Zukofsky would give us a buried allusion, whereas Albiach's laconic line seems to be part of a missing narrative in which the pathetic fallacy is operative. How, in any case, does the reference to rain lead to the body "caught / by knowing" and those "exposures" ("les poses"), which suggest physical (the body's pores, possibly) as well as mental exposure. Perhaps we may look to the final "elucidation" (the paragram on light inside that word relates to the "colour" of the rain) for answers. But no more than in Stein's great prose piece "An Elucidation" do we find one.

The issue, then, is less what Albiach derives from Zukofsky than why she thinks of herself as deriving from him. There are a number of answers to this question. The first has to do with visual prosody and syntax. Zukofsky's own page designs certainly must have given a radical French poet like Albiach permission to reject justified margins and verse columns, not to mention the alexandrine, still the dominant form in French poetry. Then, too, Zukofsky's syntax is almost made for French translation. No long periodic sentences as in Hart Crane or long subordinate clauses as in Charles Olson. And no Poundian complex of proper names that inevitably lose their rhythmic value in translation. In Zukofsky's early short poems, the

Zukofsky's enigmatic observation about "being," carefully qualified as "isolate," "beautiful," and "expect[ed]" "at evening" on the river-front, is presented in three slow-moving lines, heavily stressed on long vowels, and alliterating subtly on the *t*, a letter that appears in nine of the seventeen words of the first stanza. Roubaud heightens the sound chiming—"Rien d'autre qu'être, attendre,--and inverts the word order, so that being (*être*) is subordinated to its temporal and spatial locations: "le soir / devant les quais." In the rest of the poem, he keeps close to Zukofsky's syntax, although in line 6 he adds a verb—*dort*--and the participial modifier "turning" becomes the active verb *tourne*: the machine sleeps and the wheel turns. Remarkably, the constellations reflected in the river are designated by the same words in French as in Zukofsky's English, even as the spacing and semantic ambiguity of the last line "Under: The Dragon" is retained in Roubaud's "Dessous: le Dragon:" with its final anti-closural colon.

When, in his 1969 interview with Zukofsky, L. S. Dembo questioned this construction, remarking that "the colon in the last line after 'Under' would seem to imply that the dragon is under the river, " not vice-versa, Zukofsky replied, "There is a question of movement and enough rest; notice the space after 'Under'." The dragon is also reflected in the river—inverted. Of course, that kind of thing has already been done by Mallarmé."⁶ Roubaud's translation, "la rivière d'été-- / Dessous: le Dragon", one could thus argue, brings the English back to its French antecedents. Whether or not we take the French version to be Mallarmean, it is the case, I think, that Roubaud's version is almost as effective—perhaps as effective-- as the original. And the same holds true for #5 "Ferry," where the dialogue of "siren" and "signal" is retained using the same nouns--

Siren and signal
 Siren to signal (CSP 24)
 sirene et signal

sirene au signal -- (Traduire 106)

and the sound imitation of Zukofsky's final line—

Plash. Night. Plash. Sky.

is kept intact in

Plash. Nuit. Plash. Ciel.

Perhaps what gave Roubaud license to retain "Plash" is the English word's etymology: in its now obsolete sense of "to plait or braid," *plash* comes from the Old French *plaisier*. Thus "Plash. Nuit. Plash. Ciel" sounds exactly right in the context.⁷

What cannot be directly translated, however, is Zukofsky's penchant for nouns that can also be verbs, as in the opening line of "Ferry," "Gleams, a green lamp / In the fog." French inflections make such ambiguity impossible. Roubaud has to make a choice and opts for the noun:

Lueur, lampe verte
dans le brouillard

The resulting couplet nicely captures Zukofsky's sound, right down to the alliterating *l*'s of the original, and the simulation of the "gleams"/"green"/"lamp" sound structure in Roubaud's "Lueur"/"lampe"/"brouillard." For both poets, it is sound as visualized on the page that generates meaning.⁸ And in both cases, syntax is pared down so that carefully chosen nouns, adjectives and verbs can take on a life of their own. The careful differentiation of Zukofsky's "Siren and signal / Siren to signal" provides a model for Albiach's "l'imprécisable / l'inépuisable roman," where the sound chiming masks the real difference suggested by the *im/in* prefixes: that which is unspecifiable is by no means necessarily inexhaustible and vice-versa.

The ability of poetry to travel has everything to do with syntax. George Oppen's poetry, especially his major sequence "Of Being Numerous,"

is much more difficult to translate into French than is Zukofsky's: even that "Of" in the title is curiously ambiguous. Or again, Bertolt Brecht, who is considered in Germany at least as notable a lyric poet as he is a dramatist, is all but unknown as a poet in the U.S. because his German phrasing has no plausible English counterpart.

I turn now to the second reason for Zukofsky's place of honor among French avant-garde poets—namely, his use, already mentioned in my epigraph, of numerical constraints. In his interview with Gavronsky for *Towards a New Poetics*, Roubaud refers to troubadour poetry as his primary model. When Gavronsky tries to make a connection between that source and American poetry, Roubaud—somewhat surprisingly--remarks:

My appreciation of American poetry was more evident before than it is now, because . . . a great American poetry arose essentially during the sixties, and since then things have slowed down, weakened. . . . In any case, I'm not as interested in it as I once was. . . . American poetry doesn't really concern me, except for Zukofsky, whose concerns were close to mine. (Gavronsky 276)

The observation that "things have slowed down, weakened," refers to Roubaud's *bête noire*--the slack free verse lyric common in American poetry of the 1970s and 80s—a so-called poetry which, so Roubaud has long argued is really no more than chopped-up prose, with little attention paid to line breaks or any kind of sound structuring.⁹ In Roubaud's lexicon, poetry is by definition *verse*—which is to say, a linear form. Prose poetry, when it succeeds, adapts line to strophe, as in Roubaud's *Quelque chose noir*.¹⁰ In either case, counting, whether of stresses, syllables, or words, is central.

But counting does not mean the mere recycling of conventional forms—say, the iambic pentameter Petrarchan sonnet. Rather, the poet's job is to Make It New in the Poundian sense. Thus the alexandrine, which was the staple of French poetry for over four centuries was by no means abandoned by Rimbaud and Mallarmé, as is often thought; it was refigured

in what came to look like the twelve-tone row of Schoenberg. However playful the experiments of contemporary poets, so the argument goes, the *sine qua non* is an element of numerical recurrence. Indeed, for Roubaud, as Jean-François Puff puts it, "Poetry is the dimension of number in language," and it is number that generates meaning.¹¹ And further: the poetic form chosen can be understood, in the Wittgensteinian sense, as a form of life; it structures the poet's subjectivity.

Thus, as Puff explains it, Roubaud takes the major Western and Eastern poetic forms as models for *transformation*: the forms themselves never become obsolete even though they exist in exhausted versions that need to be scrapped. The poet's first task, accordingly, is to engage in an intense reading of the poetic tradition so as to penetrate its spirit without reproducing it exactly. "If one represents tradition as a tree," writes Puff, "as a schema of arborescence, it signifies that one can lengthen the branches, that one can discover points from which new branches may grow, that one can, finally, establish relationships between one tree and another, one tradition and another" (110-111).

Consider what happens in Roubaud's sequence *Trente et un au cube* (*Thirty-One Squared*). The core of the poem is the Japanese *tanka*, five lines with the syllable count 5-7-5-7-7. Roubaud fuses *tanka* with another Japanese form, the *renga* or anthology of lines, usually a group effort but here assembled by the poet alone. There are 31 poems, each with 31 lines, each line having the 31 syllables of the completed *tanka*. And further the piece has a rhyme scheme *ababbababbab*. . .the fusion, as Roubaud himself put it in *La fleur inverse* of "imbrication (*abab*) and "embedding"(*abba*).¹²

Trente et un cube is a love poem. So, Roubaud explains, "je vais entrelaçant /les mots et rendant pur les son / comme la langue est enlacée / à la langue dans le baiser" (I go interlacing the words and purifying their sounds / as the tongue is enlaced with the tongue in a kiss").¹³ Form thus

becomes meaning: the complex structure represents the pulse of the lovers' blood. But of course, as Roubaud knows only too well, *form* can never quite succeed in its effort to control the materials of life: "Car la forme ne peut se déclarer elle-même sans déclarer aussi l'informe" ("For form can't reveal itself without also revealing the unformed").

And here constraints come in. The aim of the Oulipo, Roubaud has argued, "is to invent (or reinvent) restrictions of a formal nature (*contraintes*) and propose them to enthusiasts interested in composing literature." What are the relationships between these constraints and potentiality? "Describable, definable, available to everyone, Oulipian constraints provide the rules of a language game (in the Wittgensteinian sense) whose 'innings' (texts composed according to its rules) are virtually unlimited and represent linguistic combinations developed from a small number of independent elements."¹⁴ Indeed, according to Roubaud, "Only mathematics could offer a way out between a nostalgic obstinacy with worn-out modes of expression and an intellectually pathetic belief in 'total freedom'. It was a matter, at least at the start, of asserting a theoretical anti-Surrealism" (Mathews 41)

There are a number of ironies in this position, insofar as it applies to Roubaud's singling out of Zukofsky as great poet of the American century. For one thing, as Stephanie Abigail Lang has shown, Zukofsky's own work, for example, his most famous poem, "Mantis," owes a great deal to Surrealism.¹⁵ For another, despite Roubaud's frequent distinction between Zukofsky's formalism and the dominant American free verse of the 1950s and 60s,¹⁶ Zukofsky's own postwar books—especially the long "A"-12 (1950-51)-- contains many passages like the following, which deals with the naming of the poet's infant son:

Naming little Paul for him
Almost ninety—
I knew Pinchos would not mind

Their "English" names being the same
He might have said to reprove me:
Jews remember the dead in time
Are in no hurry to flatter the living.
He never reproved me.
"Let it be Paul—I know
Ivanovich named for Ivan,
Before he is born.
Still, our Hebrew names are not the same
Bless him, may he live
120 years." ¹⁷

Neither the rhythm, nor the syntax and diction of this conversational passage--and there are many such exemplars of what we might call *le côté confessionnel* of Zukofsky-- fulfill the demands Roubaud makes of poetry in *La Vieillesse d'Alexandre* and elsewhere.

But it is also the case that, from the numbered one-line units of "Poem Beginning 'The'," (which Roubaud has expertly translated for the 2003 issue of *Fin*)¹⁸ to the tight Williams-like "machines made of words" of *55 Poems* and *Anew*, to the highly formalized counting stanzas of "A" -22, -23 and *Eighty Flowers*, quasi-Oulippean constraints are central to Zukofsky's oeuvre. Consider the cento¹⁹ that opens "A"-22, which, in the French version, appears in *Traduire, journal*, under the title *Fragment d'une appropriation de Louis Zukofsky* (46-49), and in a slightly different version in *Vingt poètes américains*. The hundred lines of Zukofsky's cento are based on a simple constraint: they are divided into twenty five-line stanzas with each line containing five words. Michele Leggott's magisterial *Reading Zukofsky's Eighty Flowers* studies the black spiral notebooks in which the poet recorded his intention to cover 6,000 years of history, from 3000BC to the present, each century to be allotted one double-page spread.²⁰ In "A"-22, Mark Scroggins notes, the emphasis is on "the history of human natural

philosophy, considered above all as linguistic systems by which people strive to make sense of and find ways of living in the natural world.”(Scroggins 39). But the mode of presentation is not, as in “A”-12, that of collage, for here the individual items retain their separate identity. Rather, Zukofsky now uses almost exclusively found text—a tissue of quotations, fragmented, transliterated, and spliced, from Ancient and Modern sources ranging from Pythagoras and Aristotle to Shakespeare, Sir Thomas Browne, and even engineering manuals. Unlike *Bottom* or *Le Style Apollinaire*, where the quotations are identified, “A”-22 avoids all proper names. “History’s best emptied of name’s / impertinence,” as we read in “A”-22.

Thus in the opening cento (originally called “Initial”), the third stanza reads:

let me live here ever,
sweet now, silence foison to
on top of the weather
it has said it before
why that was you that

The syntax of this final line is completed in the first line of the next stanza, “that / is how you weather division” (“A ” 508)

Michelle Leggott identifies the following sources from *The Tempest* for the first two lines here--

“Let me live here ever”—Ferdinand to Prospero , IV.1.122

“sweet now, silence”—Prospero, to Miranda, IV.1.124

“foison”—Ceres, marriage song, IV.1.110--

and notes that Chaucer’s *Parlement of Foules* supplies the source for “on top of the weather” and “it has said it before”; in the *Parlement*, the birds sing a roundel to the sun that hath “this winters weders over-shake,” which is to say gotten on top of the weather or *weathering* it (See Leggott 37-40). But what is interesting for our purposes is that Zukofsky’s splicing empties these citations of their content. For one thing, the phrases are taken out of context: Ferdinand, for example, marveling at the wedding masque Prospero

has orchestrated for the two young lovers, exclaims “Let me live here ever,” even as Prospero tells him and Miranda to be quiet (“Sweet, now, silence!”) so that Ceres can recite her blessing, which contains the now archaic word “foison” (plenty), referring to the bountiful harvest promised. Then, in the last two lines, the literary allusions give way to the calculated awkwardness of function words, pronouns and auxiliaries—“it has said it before / why that was you that,” with the “that” clause, as I noted above, left hanging. The poem thus undercuts the “foison” of the wedding masque, ironizing its “sweetness,” with the recognition that it has, so to speak, been said before, and then trailing off into calculated incoherence.

And here the constraint comes in. Mark Scoggins notes that, unlike earlier sections of the poem, “A” -22 and -23 “do not invoke the partita or fugue, for instance, nor are they modeled on a song form such as the canzone. Nevertheless, the two thousand lines of these painstakingly compacted sections bring to a high pitch the musical counterpointing of thematic, aural, and textual repetitions that structures ‘A’-1 and ‘A’-12”²¹ But musical not in the conventional sense of melody. Rather, the five-word-per-line, five lines-per stanza rule allows for a good deal of metrical freedom (some lines have five stresses, others only two), even as it provides a sense of stability and coherence, producing such curious conjunctions as “silence foison” that compact the unlike speeches of Prospero and Ceres into a seamless web. *Texture*, not rhythmic structure, is what counts in this lyric.

Now let us turn to Roubaud’s translation of the five-line stanza and its override into line 6:

laissez-moi vivre ici toujours
doux maintenant, silence foison pour
et comble de beau temps
il l’a dit autrefois
comment cela est toi cela

et comment tu beau temps division (VPA 63)

Roubaud adopts Zukofsky's five-word count—but with significant variation. Here, for example, line 4 has only four words, unless we count the elided "le" of "il l'a dit" as a word. Similarly, in line 6 above, there are six words, Roubaud evidently playing on the sound similarity of "comment tu" and "beau temps" to stretch the line out. Then, too, there is no French equivalent for the verb-noun ambiguity of "weather," and so Roubaud, making no attempt to find the right verb, gives us one particular kind of weather—*beau temps*—and places it in apposition to "division," which is, for Zukofsky, the object of the verb. For Roubaud, therefore, the game is to create clashing fragments rather than plausible phrases like "that / is how you weather division." His version heightens the triple rhyme in the last line—*comment, beau temps, division*—signals a further turn from semantics to sound at the further expense of the alluded referents.

Thus, for a French reader, the Shakespeare sources simply disappear: "doux maintenant" is hardly going to evoke Prospero calming down the young lovers. "Foison," on the other hand, is perhaps more familiar in French than in English; since *foisonner* used as a verb means "to abound." The French stanza, in any case, has more sound chiming than the English: *toujours/ pour* and *maintenant/ foison/temps, division*. Sound repetition thus introduces a kind of Troubadour element into Zukofsky's less figured, purposely ungainly and uncomfortable language.

Indeed, A-22 offers Roubaud a special challenge. What happens, Roubaud's "appropriation" asks, when one poem takes over another's structure and usually its exact words but cuts off the referent? The three stanzas that follow #3 ("let me live here ever"), are revealing:

is how you weather division
a peacock's grammar perching—and
perhaps think that they see

or they fly thru a
window not knowing it there

the window could they sing
it broken need not bleed
one proof of its strength
a need birds cannot feign
persisting for flight as when

they began to exist—error
if error vertigo their sun
eyes delirium—both initial together
rove into the blue initial
surely it carves a breath (A 508-509)

Reading these stanzas against the notebook versions, Leggott establishes the presence of the ninth-century philosopher John Scotus Erigena, specifically the sentence in *The Division of Nature*, “In the intelligible world . . . Grammar begins with the letter, from which all writing is derived and into which it is all resolved.” “Because the word *grammar* derives from *gramma* (letter),” remarks Leggott, “we see that Erigena is as much the literalist in these matters as Zukofsky could wish” (Leggott 46). And she relates the concern for what the Russian avant-garde called “the letter as such,” back to the opening tercet of “A”-22: AN ERA / ANY TIME / OF YEAR,” of which more in a moment.

In the finished poem, Erigena’s sentence, copied out in the notebook version, is crossed out, and Zukofsky substitutes “a peacocks grammar perching—”. The peacocks take us back to the masque in *Tempest*, IV as well as to the *Parlement of Foules*. Then too peacock blue relates to “blow blue up against bellow /--scapes welcome young birds—initial” of the cento’s first stanza. And, just as one *gramma* (letter) can change the meaning of a poetic line or a sentence, so it is the birds’s “eyes delirium” to fly “thru a /

window not knowing it there,” and hence “bleed” in a moment of “error vertigo” as they zoom into the sun with the “blue initial” of their “carve[d] breath.” *Grammar* and its source *gramma* are the measure of metamorphosis felt everywhere in the poet’s perception of the natural world.²²

“A text written according to a constraint describes the constraint,” is perhaps the central Oulipo rule, as formulated by Roubaud (Matthews 42). Zukofsky’s five-word line enacts Erigena’s precept that “grammar begins with the letter.” In the line, “a peacocks grammar perching-and,” the word *grammar* is right at the center, flanked by words beginning with *a* and *p* chiastically arranged: *a peacocks . . . perching—and*”, the sound picked up in the next line in the word “perhaps.” The internal rhyme of “window not knowing” and “need not bleed,” and the modulation of individual letters, as in *error vertigo* is prominent because words that have lost their phrasal or clausal context as have Zukofsky’s, inevitably receive steady emphatic stressing, as in “éyes |delirium |bóth | inícial| togéther.” And that steady beat prompts the reader to accept what would otherwise be puzzles or anomalies. What, for example, is the referent of the pronoun “it” in the last line above stanza and why does “it carve a breath” “surely”? What’s sure about it?

Roubaud’s version is remarkable in rendering the original so perceptively. Consider the last stanza of the three above:

ils commençaient à être--erreur
 si erreur vertige leur soleil
 yeux délire—tous deux premiers
 errant, dans le bleu initial
 qui sûrement découpe un soufflé (VPA 65)

Here, as in the original, “être” and “erreur” (“exist” and “error”) are linked by sound but the syntax is ambiguous: is it an error that they began to

exist or an error to think so, or what? In the second line the apposition “si erreur vertige leur soleil” again follows the original, “if error vertigo their sun,” allowing the relation of sun to error and vertigo can be construed in a number of ways. “Erreur” and “vertige,” for example, are linked by consonance and so are “erreur” and “errant” in line 4, even as “error” and “rove” are linked in Zukofsky’s original. But *être* and *erreur* are so close that one also might say that our very existence is an error. And so on.

From the French translator’s perspective, then, Zukofsky’s constrained asyntactic lyric provides a perfect poetic challenge. We can see this best in the little valentine, first printed in 1970 on a Unicorn Press poetry postcard, with its blue uppercase type on a ground of yellow (cf. “blow blue up against yellow,” -22, line 4) that came to stand at the head of “A”-22:

AN ERA
 ANY TIME
 OF YEAR (A 508)

Both Peter Quartermain and Michele Leggott devote pages to the sources, allusions, anagrams and puns contained in these six words, printed in boldface capitals, two words per line, three justified lines, and I shall not attempt to summarize their complex findings.²³ Suffice it here to point to the relation of *era* to the Latin *aera* (from *aes* [ore, brass, money] and hence an item of counting. In an undated diagrammatic note opposite the title page of the “A”-22 spiral notebook (see Leggott 41), the little poem’s eighteen letters are seen to yield 9 vowels (3 per line) and 9 consonants (if we include *y*), and the right justified margin gives us the word *AER*, while the left can be diagrammed as *ANNO* for year. *Anno* in turn yields *annona*, which means “yearly produce, the annual income of natural products” and

this connects to the opening line of the cento itself, "Others letters a sum owed." And so on.

But what does Roubaud do with the six-word headnote? There are two versions, the first from 1974, reproduced in *Traduire, Journal*, the second, in *Vingt poètes américains* (1980):

	UN	E	ERE
E	NU	N	POINT
DE	LA	D	U REE

	UNE	ERE
EN	UN	POINT
DE	LA	DUREE

In the first version above, Roubaud's eight words (twenty-four letters) are taken apart so that "UN—E" ("an") can yield to its mirror image "NU" ("nude") and the English word "END" is produced running vertically down the page. "UN E" forms a chiasmus with "E NU." But I think the second version, which translates as "An Era / at a point / in duration," is more effective. For Zukofsky's justified margin spelling A-E-R, Roubaud substitutes a step-line, the final letters at the right margins spelling "E-T-E" (summer). Further, "ERE" and "DUREE" are cognates. And the columnar layout also gives us NUL (zero, nothing) and lets "U-N-E" (an) be both horizontal and vertical. In an especially nice touch, the *U* in lines 1 and 2 is absorbed in the larger "DUREE" of the poem.

Roubaud's "valentine" not only captures the sense of Zukofsky's original, leading into the meditation on time and space, but also creates its own numerological equivalent. In Zukofsky, there are 3 lines comprising 6

words and eighteen letters: $3 \times 6 = 18$. In Roubaud there are 3 lines with 8 words and 24 letters: $3 \times 8 = 24$. The constraint thus remains faithful to the power of three.

For Roubaud, then, Zukofsky's late poetry furnishes a goldmine for his own Oulipo invention and word play. It is only fair to say, however, that the elaborate lipograms, "chimeras," and "snowballs" of Oulipo require a rather different kind of skill from such decisions as writing lines that have five words each.²⁴ In Zukofsky's case, the semantic structure of the created poem continues to count for more than it does in most Oulipo works. The sources of the allusions may be buried, but the resulting etymologies and word play produces new semantic relationships, as when "an era" yields *aera* and so on.

Roubaud's own poetry, of course, takes the constraint much further and hence creates a rather different poetic field. Indeed, the difference suggests to me that there is yet another reason—although perhaps not a conscious one-- why Roubaud, Albiach, and their circles have made so much of Zukofsky. In post-1968 France, when Zukofsky first came into favor, he had the advantage of being *Not Pound*, a phrase I use in the sense we have all been using the term *Not Bush*. *The Cantos* do, after all, carry with them the baggage of Fascism, anti-Semitism, and a certain misogyny: the women in Pound's poetry are always goddesses or "whores from Eleusis," whereas the men are generally real people like the Possum (Eliot) and Uncle William (Yeats). Pound, moreover, forces us to interest ourselves in such nonsensical items as the use of stamp-scrip by the citizens of Wörgl, Austria and exposes us to what may be excessively heavy doses of Confucius and John Adams.

Zukofsky, by contrast, was the son of a poor Jewish pants presser, who grew up on New York's Lower East Side and whose first language was Yiddish. A Communist during the thirties, he wrote an elegy for Lenin, and

"A"-9, as I already noted, is made up of phrases and sentences from *Kapital*. The perspective of his writings—from "Poem beginning 'The'" and the early short lyrics to the essays collected in *Prepositions* and the commonplace book *Bottom*—is liberal and humane—as open to the problems of urban poverty as to the glories of English literature. In France, where intellectuals and poets are almost by definition on the Left, "A" thus provides what may be a more palatable diet of Poundiana than do the *Cantos* themselves: epic sweep, verbal brilliance, an encyclopedic use of elegant verse forms like the canzone, sestina, centro, and renga, as well as the expert juxtaposition of verse and prose passages and of such unlikely pairs as Marx and Cavalcanti, Spinoza and Veblen.

Yet –and this is a topic for another essay—from the distance of the 21st Century, a textual comparison is, in the end, less favorable to Zukofsky than to Pound, the question being where derivativeness ends and true innovation begins. Late in his career, in *A"-22 and -23*, as in *Eighty Flowers* and *Catullus*, Zukofsky was doing something quite original: such rule-governed mosaics as the flower-poems "Pachysandra" and "Liveforever" are lyric puzzles that have no precedent in Pound. But it took Zukofsky a long time to get there, and the early books of "A" can sometimes sound embarrassingly like the work of Zukofsky's mentor.

The correspondence between Pound and Zukofsky is revealing in this regard. On 27 November 1930, Pound wrote to his young disciple (Zukofsky was twenty-six at the time), who had recently sent him a packet containing the first seven movements, as they were then designated, of "A":

recd. one development or fugue or fuagal etc. produced by Ludwig von Zuk und Sohn, on not always digested meat of his forebears, but with a ditional and final contortion or fugal (quasi) termination in form of canzone (miscalled 7 sonnets) but still a conzone a la sestina but with 14 lines to the strophe. [The reference is to "A"-7]

Crit wd. Be

[A.] eliminate top dressing inherited
You'll have to work at that, just as hard as I did to get Roberto de Browning's
his vocabulary out of my system.

Wd. B [B] the purely rational and commentarian expositions a bit professorial
in parts.²⁵

And Pound concludes that Zukofsky's would-be epic poem "should not go on
after your seven wollups," "A" being, in a phrase that evidently cut Zukofsky
to the quick, "a work not in but showing progress" (76). But then, so as not
to hurt the younger poet's feelings, Pound adds:

You have not wasted the year or however long it has been.

I strongly suggest that YOU send me a crit. of it before I say anything more about it.

. . .

Certain things can be remedied more or less by procedures known to
yr/venbl/ frien' but it wd. even better to remedy them by procedures evolved by L.
Z. ipsissimo. (76-77)

But it would be a long time before *L.Z. ipsissimo* would have the confidence
to surface. For the moment, Zukofsky was in despair: I have rarely read a
letter as defensive as Zukofsky's reply to Pound of 13 December 1930. He
cannot, he notes somewhat maliciously, "do as Bill [Williams] does—notice
something the write the note down and then type it off . . . and another
poem!" (78). Rather, his aim is to produce an "epic' 24" movements for his
long poem. The *Cantos* an influence? Zukofsky claims that he had not yet
seen "the 3 Mts. Edtns of your Cantos" and hence "had read only the early
ones in Lustra & 4,5 & 6 in Poems 1918-21." This is hard to believe given
that, for example, the four Malatesta Cantos (8-11) were published in Eliot's
Criterion in July 1923. Internal evidence, in any case, suggests an almost
excessive familiarity with Pound's collage technique, his use of allusions and
time shifts, "A" presenting itself, like the *Cantos*, as "a poem including
history." Indeed, further along in the December letter, Zukofsky shifts from

a defensive tone to obsequiousness: "In the meantime if you can spare the time & it doesn't interfere with your own processes, I'd like to know what particular things can be 'remedied by procedures known to you.' Be hard on the damn thing—slash it—if you think it's a dilution of *The Cantos*" (81).

Pound was not exactly a grand old man in 1930; he was forty-five when this appeal came in and he was living in exile in Rapallo, neglected by the literary world at large. But, for better or worse, he considered himself a poet of such strength that he had never sought the sort of advice Zukofsky is seeking here, although, of course, he was happy to get any help finding publishers. It is doubly interesting, therefore that Zukofsky entertains the doubt that "A" might be a "dilution" of *The Cantos*. Zukofsky's phrasing raises the specter of Pound's distinction, in *ABC of Reading*, between three classes:

1. Inventors—"Men who found a new process, or whose extant work gives us the first known example of a process.
2. The masters. Men who combined a number of such processes, and who used them as well as or better than the inventors.
3. The diluters. Men who came after the first two kinds of writer, and couldn't do the job quite as well.²⁶

Pound clearly puts himself in the first class and he would probably have put the young Zukofsky in #3.—a placement we need, by no means, accept as accurate. Still, Roubaud's estimate of Zukofsky as "without a doubt, together with Pound, the most important American poet of our time" —an estimate shared by American language poets, many of whom would go further and get rid of the "together with Pound" qualification—is perhaps due for reassessment. One of the by-products of rereading Zukofsky, as we are doing here and now on the occasion of the poet's centenary, is the recognition of just how great a poet his mentor was, his "ideas" notwithstanding. Indeed, the paradox of "A," aggressively "not-Poundian" as we now take it to be, is that it sends us right back to the *Cantos*.

Footnotes

¹Louis Zukofsky, *Complete Short Poetry* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University, 1991), p. 34. All further references to the short poems are to this edition, subsequently cited as CSP. The Roubaud translation appears in Roubaud, "Louis Zukofsky," *Europe: Special Issue: Une littérature méconnue des U.S.A.* No. 578-79 (June-July 1977): 78-108; rpt. Roubaud, *Traduire, Journal* (Caen: NOUS, 2000), 108.

²See Serge Gavronsky, Introduction, *Toward a New Poetics: Contemporary writing in France: Interviews with an Introduction and Translated Texts* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1994), pp. 38-44, 52-56. Gavronsky cites, not only specific French translations of Zukofsky but also the various festivals and conferences held at Royaumont and the Centre international de poésie at Marseilles where Zukofsky translations were read and discussed. Anne-Marie Albiach's version of the first half of "A"-9 first appeared in the journal *Siècle à mains* in 1970; Pierre Alféri's translation of Zukofsky essays appeared in *Louis Zukofsky: Un Objectif, et deux autres essais* (Royaumont: Fondation Royaumont, 1989). Michel Deguy and Jacques Roubaud's groundbreaking *Vingt poètes américains* was published by Gallimard in 1980. This volume is subsequently cited in the text as VPA.

³Peter Quartermain, "Not at all Surprised by Science: Louis Zukofsky's First Half of 'A'-9," in Quartermain, *Disjunctive Poetics: From Gertrude Stein to Louis Zukofsky and Susan Howe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 80.

⁴ Henry Deluy, "Entretien avec Anne-Marie Albiach," *Action poétique* 74 (1978), 15.

⁵ Anne-Marie Albiach, *Etat* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1971), 27; *Etat*, trans. Keith Waldrop (Windsor, VT: Awede, 1989), 31.

⁶ L. S. Dembo, "The 'Objectivist Poet: Four interviews,'" *Contemporary Literature*, 10 (Spring 1969), 155-219, p. 211; rpt. in Terrell, 265-81; see pp. 272-73. Mallarmé figures significantly in Zukofsky's poetry: for example, at the end of "A-19. And in a recent interview, the French poet and translator Yves di Manno refers to Zukofsky as "a sort of

Mallarmé américain,” with respect to his opacity, enigma, and the musicality of his syntax. See Yves di Manno, “Conversation avec Sebastian Reichmann,” *Po&sie* 97 (April 2003): special issue “Poètes d’Amérique et de France: les `Alliés substantiels,” 14.

⁷ In Yves di Manno’s translation of “Ferry,” published in *Java* 4 (Summer 1990), 30, the last line is translated, “Flac. Nuit. Flac. Ciel,” which also works nicely. And the refrain is “Sirène, signal / Sirène vers signal.”

⁸ In the Yves de Manno version, we have “Lueurs, lampe verte / Dans la brume.”

⁹ See Jacques Roubaud, “Notes sur l’evolution récente de la prosodie (1960-1974),” *Action poétique* 62 (1975): 50-60. These important remarks are then absorbed into the argument of *La Vieillesse d’Alexandre. Essai sur quelques états récents du vers français* (Paris: Editions Ramsay, 1988), passim; Marjorie Perloff, “The Oulipo Factor: The Procedural Poetics of Caroline Bergvall and Christian Bok,” *Textual Practice*, 18 (1), 2004: 23-45.

¹⁰ I discuss *Quelque chose noir* in “But Isn’t *The Same* at least the Same?: Wittgenstein and the Question of Poetic Translatability” in **The Literary Wittgenstein**, ed. John Gibson and Wolfgang Huemer (eds.), (London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 34-54; rpt. in my *Differentials: Poetry, Poetics, Pedagogy* (Tuscaloosa, University of Alabama Press, 2004),

¹¹ Jean-François Puff, “Le déploiement du nouveau chez Roubaud,” *Formes poétiques contemporaines*, 2003 (Paris: Les Impressions nouvelles, 2003), 99-119; see p. 106. Translation mine.

¹² Jacques Roubaud, *La fleur inverse. Essai sur l’art formel des troubadours* (Paris, Ramsay, 1986), chapter 6.

¹³ Jacques Roubaud, *Trente et un au cube* (Paris: Gallimard, 1973), p. 20

¹⁴ Jacques Roubaud, “Introduction Jacques Roubaud the Oulipo and Combinatorial Art” (1991), in *Oulipo Compendium*, compiled by Harry Matthews & Alastair Brotchie (London: Atlas, 1998), 36-44. See pp. 38, 40.

¹⁵ In *Le Monde, Compte Rendu: Lectures de Louis Zukofsky, Thèse doctoral*, Université Paris III—Sorbonne Nouvelle, 1999, 146-61. Stéphanie Abigail Lang demonstrates convincingly that “Mantis” is largely a found text based on an article by Roger Caillois called “La Mante religieuse” for the Surrealist journal *Minotaure* 5 (1933).

¹⁶ See, for example, the roundtable “Des Poètes qu’on appelait ‘Objectivistes,’” Entretien entre Serge Fauchereau, Jacques Roubaud, et Charles Dobzynski,” *Europe*:578-70 (June-July 1977), 7-30, p. 17.

¹⁷ Louis Zukofsky, “A” (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 143. All further references are to this edition.

¹⁸ “Poème commençant ‘La,’” *Fin* 17 (July 2003): 3-14.

¹⁹ The term *Cento*, according to Harry Mathews in the *Oulipo Compendium*, refers to “the ancient practice, also known as ‘patchwork verse’ or ‘mosaics,’ [that] makes a poem out of lines by other poets” (120). John Ashbery’s “The Dong with the Luminous Nose,” which begins, “Within a windowed niche of that high hall/ I wake and feel the fell of dark, not day. / I shall rush out as I am, and walk the street” (121), is Mathews’s example. But whereas Ashbery’s cento relies on well-known lines from Keats’s “Eve of St. Agnes,” Hopkins’s *Terrible Sonnets*, and Eliot *Waste Land*, respectively, Zukofsky’s collaged fragments are all but impossible to identify

²⁰ See Michele Leggott, *Reading Zukofsky’s 80 Flowers* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins, 1989), 9-11.

²¹ Scroggins 236. In an interview with Jean Daive, (*Fin* 17 (July 2003)), the poet’s musician son Paul Zukofsky is quite skeptical about the usual supposition that his father uses fugal form in “A”. A fugue, he argues, “organizes certain aspects of music and has specific rules; I don’t know what he [Louis] means by it” (26).

²² On the metamorphosis theme, see Barry Ahearn, *Zukofsky’s “A”: An Introduction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 183-86.

²³See Quartermain 104-08; Leggott 34-46.

²⁴ To write a *chimera*, one chooses a text for treatment, removes its nouns, verbs, and adjectives. Then “replace the nouns with those taken in order from a different work, the verbs with those from a second work, the adjectives with those from a third.” So a chimera for “April is the cruelest month,” using Claude C. Bowers, *My Mission to Spain*, Lewis Carroll’s, *Symbolic Logic*, and Kingsley Amis’s *Lucky Jim*, we get “Jue contains the silliest credentials. A *Snowball* is made by beginning with a word with only one letter (or syllable), the second two, the third three, and so on. See *Oulipo Compendium*, 124, 1226.

²⁵Barry Ahearn (ed.), *Pound/Zukofsky: Selected Letters of Ezra Pound and Louis Zukofsky* (New York: New Directions, 1987), 75-76. The eccentric phonetic spelling is Pounds and is a device Zukofsky adopted in his own letters.

²⁶ Ezra Pound, *ABC of Reading* (1934; New York: New Directions, 1960), 34.