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Louis Zukofsky's London: From Pound to Pastoral

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Abstract: In this paper I address Louis Zukofsky's London, tracing representations of the city (and of Europe) and the development of his treatment of these subjects in his work. I describe how London's most important role in Zukofsky's poetry comes towards the end of his career, when a visit in the late 1960s profoundly influenced the subject matter and techniques of his late sequences *80 Flowers* and *Gamut: 90 Trees*. I argue that the most important touchstone for Zukofsky's approach to London was Ezra Pound and trace some similarities and differences between the two poets' descriptions of London and Europe.

Keywords: Louis Zukofsky, London, Pastoral, Ezra Pound

Pound's Europe / Zukofsky's Europe: 1933

When comparing the Londons of Ezra Pound and Louis Zukofsky, perhaps the most pressing initial distinction to make is that of the difference between their experiences of travel outside of the United States. While Pound visited Europe and North Africa as an adolescent, exiled himself to Europe almost continuously from 1908 until his forcible repatriation in 1945 and returned to the continent to die, Zukofsky's first trip outside of the USA came with a visit to Europe in the summer of 1933, was brief and would not be repeated for over twenty years. He would return only twice, for short visits in 1956 and 1969.

The initial 1933 trip would be a decidedly Poundian affair and would colour his future visits. At Pound's urging Zukofsky visited Paris and Rapallo, while he also took the time to visit his friend Tibor Serly who was visiting family in Hungary. He was part-funded by Pound and William Carlos Williams, and Pound also provided the younger poet with a series of introductions to associates including 'Fernand Léger,

Constantin Brancusi, Jules Supervielle, Hilaire Hiler, Jean Cocteau, Louis Aragon, André Breton, Salvador Dalí, and Max Ernst' (Scroggins 131). The most important part of the trip came, however, with Zukofsky's informal matriculation at the Rapallo 'Ezuversity', in a class that included Basil Bunting and James Laughlin, the first of whom would become a lifelong collaborator and close reader, the second a partner in a mutual and persistent incomprehension.¹ A conception of Europe as a map of Poundian locales was set for Zukofsky on this trip, with Paris and Rapallo, through his travels and conversation with Pound, marked out as contemporary vortices added to the cultural geography of *The Cantos*, which Zukofsky had been reading in piecemeal fashion as sections appeared through this period. Unsurprisingly, then, Europe would often appear in early sections of Zukofsky's long poem "A" and in his other works of the period in a manner that repeats Pound's treatment of *The Cantos*' 'Sacred Places' (Kenner 318-48), sometimes utilising the same locales and at other times transferring the Poundian European cultural-ideogram onto subjects Pound was not greatly interested in (including J.S. Bach and Karl Marx) while maintaining a recognisably *Cantos*-derived schema for his organisation of these places.

Early references to London in Zukofsky's work follow this pattern: the city's first mention in "A" comes in "A"-8, with Zukofsky outlining how

**Communists assembled in London
Sketched the Manifesto of the party itself.**

(49)

Though addressing, with the formation of the Communist Party, a subject that was of only passing interest for Pound,² the method is identifiably Poundian and is that of the 'luminous detail'; those details defined by Catherine Paul as those 'pieces [of information] that stand in for significant changes in the outlook or configuration of an era' (82), here the location of the parturition of the Communist manifesto in London.

A few years later, with war broken out in Europe, London reappears in "A"-10, again in an arrangement that recalls Pound's use of places. This tenth movement of "A", published in 1940, marks Zukofsky's response to the beginning of the Second World War in Europe and represents a dividing line in his poem, both in terms of the poet's abandonment of an overt espousal of Marxist-Leninist politics and in the slackening of his dialogue with Pound, who was now out of writing-range behind Axis lines. "A"-10 describes the collapse of Europe heard over the radio in Zukofsky's New York apartment, miming the pain of this collapse with tropes and methods that predict *The Pisan Cantos* (1948) as well as the medium, the radio, of Pound's coming misadventure. The passage on pages 112-13 is rife with prescient Poundianisms, offering a painfully disjointed poetry here, which reads as a surprising pre-echo of Pound's *Pisan Cantos* method. Pound, like Zukofsky in "A"-10, would also use the 'Kyrie Eleision' to express a similar anguish at the implosion of postwar Europe in Canto 79 (503), much as Zukofsky uses it here to bewail the fall of Paris. With 'The song passes out of the voices', Zukofsky again seems to ventriloquise Pound, recalling Pound's 'rattle of old men's voices' in Canto 2, even while condemning the blackshirted Fascists that Pound was gravitating towards across the Atlantic. The method here, with its imperative force, interpolation of quotation and emphasis on the line as stand-alone rhythmic unit, is distinctly reminiscent of Pound, and yet the

plaintive, United Front-style reaction to the fall of Paris and the fact that the blame for the war is adduced squarely to Fascism contradict the contemporary Pound, who was both moving further to the right and increasingly assuming a rhetoric more hysterical than mournful by this time.

Shortly before this, cracks had begun to show in Pound and Zukofsky's friendship. When Pound had briefly visited the USA in 1939, with the hope of staving off the coming conflagration through hoped-for meetings with leading American politicians, Zukofsky had noticed that his mentor had developed something of a thick-ear, and he had, referring to Pound's apparently unquestioning acceptance of the radio persona of Father Coughlin, made a prophetic complaint:

Whatever you don't know, Ezra, you ought to know voices.
(*Prepositions* + 165)

Thus the new radio voices are devoid of song; '[t]he song passes out of the voices' of Coughlin, of those ominous radio voices transmitted from Europe and, by extension, from Pound's own voice. And in the midst of this turmoil London persists, a city whose survival is not vouchsafed and whose loss will be of immense, if unspecified, importance. Here, again, Zukofsky pre-empts *The Pisan Cantos*, this threatened city predicting the resonance of Pound's cry in Canto 80 'God knows what else is left of our London / my London, your London' (530). In "A"-10 London is the last bulwark in Europe's defence against Fascism; throughout *The Pisan Cantos* it represents, in a similar usage, a cultural base that the aged poet can return to in desperate reverie. The fantastical nature of both of these Londons should be noted: while Zukofsky had never been to the British cosmopolis he imagines, Pound's Pisan-London would be one transfigured by memory and disaster, as impossible to visit as the London imagined by Zukofsky.

London in and out of "A": 1956

Zukofsky's second visit to Europe, in the summer of 1956, would come in the company of his wife Celia, whom he had married in 1939, and teenage son Paul, born in 1943, and served as an opportunity for Zukofsky to hand on the knowledge he had acquired in Rapallo to his family. It would also mark the poet's first visit to London. The extent that this trip was a revision of Pound's cultural syllabus is made clear by Paul's anecdotal account of the journey:

My father behaved like a demented vacuum-cleaning machine on that trip. To use the British, there was nothing cultural that he did not 'hoover' [...], as long as it involved things prior to the 20th-century. There was not one fucking museum that we did not have to see (at the time I had just begun to understand the utility of the female, and I remember finding at the local TABAK in Paris, and admiring and desiring, a pack of playing cards with naked women. This I was not allowed to purchase, but as long as one could see the female nude headless and legless in chipped marble, that was quite acceptable). We schlepped to such an extent, that I ended up in Paris three months later with my feet becoming black every day, until it was discovered that the soles of my shoes had been completely worn through.

The Zukofskys visited Rapallo, from which Pound had been absent for more than a decade, and whose legend was forgotten, or, perhaps, concealed before the tourists. The poet now found Rapallo 'worse than Coney Island when it's 100 degrees' (Scroggins 280): Liguria without Pound was cultureless, an intrusion on the family's round of pristine European museums and cultural shrines. Zukofsky relates his impressions of this second European trip in his undervalued poem '4 Other Countries', where he offers more detail of his time in a Rapallo without Pound (see, for example, Zukofsky's passage about a supposed associate of Pound's called Gino Pasterino [*Complete Short Poetry* 179-80]). While there is a deferential affection in this account – a sadness for Rapallo's reversion to an indeterminate Mediterranean resort town in the master's absence – there is also a detectable redressing of Pound's position in the younger poet's pantheon, an assertion of the now mature Zukofsky's independence from his former mentor. Zukofsky's training under Pound had equipped him to travel Poundlessly among the Poundian Sacred Places; almost all the locales featured in '4 Other Countries' are identifiably Poundian and include the church of San Zeno in Verona, Sirmione and the tomb of Galla Placidia at San Vitale in Ravenna, at which Zukofsky's re-enactment of a moment of *The Cantos* serves both as a tribute to Placidia and to Pound's long poem. Where Pound had noted 'In the gloom, the gold gathers the light against it' in canto 11 (51), Zukofsky sees:

The gold that shines
in the dark
of Galla Placidia[.] (*Complete Short Poetry* 190)

Briefly after this moment Zukofsky places his Poundian touristic programme into relation with his late domestic poetry; the patterned vault comparable for the poet to the new carpet that his wife plans for their home, the great moments of the European cultural ideogram are reconfigured to fit a contemporary domestic arrangement. Thus Zukofsky subtly distances his practice from Pound's, even in the midst of his most derivatively Poundian moments.

In contrast to Rapallo, however, London is mostly elided in '4 Other Countries', which yields just a couple of brief mentions in contrast with the sights of Rome. At one moment the poet looks out over the Italian capital and notes that the plaster version of Trajan's column housed in London (*Complete Short Poetry* 187) can, though shorn of Rome's ancient backdrop, be seen more clearly than the original; an elision of the actuality of London that speaks to the primary blankness with which it served in Zukofsky's cultural understanding at this time – the city of the great museums, collectors and readers, not a city, in contrast to Rome and the lost Rapallo, with an inherent cultural value.

London 1969

Zukofsky's next, final and most important visit to London lasted from the 13th to the 27th of May 1969 and was an adventure that proved foundational for both of the poet's final projects, *80 Flowers* and the unfinished 'Gamut: Trees ninety 5's'. These would be distinctive projects that built on the poetics of the final sections of "A" – repeating and refining the eight word pattern of "A" 22 & 23 to create short, grid-like

poems in which conventional syntax is subsumed under complex patterns of phonetic soundings and etymological derivation. The '8' pattern represented a renovation of traditional poetic systems of organisation in which syllabic and stress counts are superseded. Robert Duncan reports Zukofsky saying 'if I haven't got a feel for words and syllables by this time I shouldn't even be in the business' (334). Thus the overlay of the eight-word pattern would work around, within and against other, more conventional patterns. On the 21st of May Zukofsky gave a reading at the American Embassy in London, an event that provided a fascinating moment of exchange for Zukofsky with the young British avant-garde. In the question and answer session that followed his reading the poet made a distinction between the urban and the botanical, revealing a search for a new locale to replace the New York demesne that had dominated "A" and most of his short poetry:

I'd like to keep solid because I can't help myself, I was born in a gas age, but I don't want to falsify my time so I get it down; it's an attraction, but the older I get, oh I'd like to look at a leaf occasionally, and in the polluted city of New York with all the fumes and so on I really go out hunting for a crocus in an areaway.

(*Prepositions* + 170)

London, a greener, more cultivated city than New York, was the locale that permitted Zukofsky's last poetry; to imagine the unusual, controlled botanical environment that is those works' signature, he needed London, and his arrival in the city in 1969, as he was defining his final poetics, was crucial to those last works.

In notes from that trip that Michelle Leggott included in her important volume *Reading 80 Flowers* (Leggott 325), Zukofsky describes a visit to the West End which appears refracted – compressed, perhaps concentrated, in a key passage in "A"-23 (see "A" [537]). In the passage in question Zukofsky sets down the two key ingredients of his London and the city's underlying importance to his late botanical poetry: closely cultivated ornamental gardens and rain, both of which appear in the original passage that Leggott prints, and are made to stand out even more clearly in the compacted version Zukofsky worked into "A"-23.

Zukofsky's London, then, though its weather is familiar, is in fact less the great cosmopolis than the setting for a distinctive *pastoral* mode. It is a noticeably contained and ordered pastoralism, but it is distinctively non-urban nonetheless: the great squares of Bloomsbury, Fitzrovia and St James's take on a quaintly domestic aspect, while the busy thoroughfares that join them, and the grimy alienation of the London Underground, which Eliot referred to as 'sojourning among the termites', (Welsh 192) are elided. The most important London locale for Zukofsky was another garden, however, Kew Gardens – around which Zukofsky was shown by George Mully, the Programme Consultant to Cultural Affairs Office at the American Embassy, on the 19th of May (Mully makes reference to his presence during the visit in an unpublished letter to Zukofsky held at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center (HRC hereafter)). Kew offers a very different London from the disorderly vortex of avant-garde activity Pound had experienced in the early century: it was originally laid out to be part pleasure garden, part encyclopaedic botanical museum and part experimental centre with the aim of amassing as many as possible of the British Empire's plants for

study and exploitation. Botanist Peter Collinson described Kew in 1766 as '[t]he paradise of our world, where all plants are found, that money or interest can procure' (Mancke and Shamma 276). Kew makes an ideal setting for Zukofsky's late paradisaical-botanical sequences and was experienced by the poet just as he was beginning to write his late paradisaical poems, "A"-22 & -23, *80 Flowers* and 'Gamut'. As Michelle Leggott notes in this context, 'paradise' is etymologically derived from the Persian for park or garden, (406) and is thus a natural venue for Zukofsky's late paradisaical-pastoral vision. Again fittingly, it is one that privileges the cultivated, the botanical *and* the encyclopaedic and etymological; the patience and minute exactness of the *80 Flowers* form miming the processes of tending flowers grown for exhibition in the hothouses of Kew at the same time as it engages with the volume's carefully selected dictionary sources.

Though the botanical possibilities suggested by the visit to Kew had a great influence on the formation of the *80 Flowers* technique, it would be in the notes for his next, uncompleted, project that their full appeal to Zukofsky is revealed. At the poet's death in 1978 only a single five-line stanza was completed (or completed and retained) of the sequence that was to have become 'Gamut: Trees ninety 5's'. On the first page Zukofsky records the first and, implicitly, foundational note for the sequence:

5/13-27/69 London Notes (5/19/69) Kew Gardens: ..a Chinese tree <name?>
whose leaves undersides in the wind + rain (over the rolling green) hang their
white papery tags[.] ('Gamut' notes)

This seems like it may very well be the originating moment of 'Gamut: Trees ninety 5's' and is one of quiet exoticism that is evocative of Kew; an oriental tree is encountered in a distant city while, as in the description of London in "A"-23, the themes of cultivation and drizzle are again combined. On the same page of notes Zukofsky writes the word 'MANDUKAS' from the Indian Veda in praise of frogs, with the instruction to 'transliterate', noting the source as Arthur Anthony MacDonnell's *Vedic Reader* (1917). The note describes the mandukas as a '<rain> "spell" panegyric of frogs raising their voices' in celebration of the arriving rains 'like Brahman pupils repeating the lessons of their teacher'. Drizzle in suburban Kew thus connects with the frogs and foliage of the Far East, creating a uniquely Zukofskian version of London as the seat of an Orientalist pastoralism.

Zukofsky follows this in the 'Gamut' notes with a series of further Vedic references that include the 'Hymn of Creation', the prior use of which in "A"-12 and "A"-22 he notes, and which is represented here with the key formulation 'sat – ásat', the existent out of the non-existent. He then goes on to note down 'VÁTA = the wind', a concept here connected with the 'something from nothing' equation of 'sat – ásat'. MacDonnell translates the final strophe of the hymn dedicated to the wind as

[b]reath of the gods, germ of the world, this god fares according to his will. His sounds are heard (but) his form is not (seen). To that Váta we would pay worship with oblation. (MacDonnell 218-19)

Leggott detects 'Váta' in the first line of the *80 Flowers* epigraph. That reads

Heart us invisibly thyme time
(Complete Short Poetry 325)

with the first word housing 'hear' and, therefore, the action of this Vedic breath in *80 Flowers* and 'Gamut: Trees ninety 5's' (76), a practice not dissimilar to the patented Zukofsky-homophonic translation method employed in *Catullus* and elsewhere, and by which semiotic sense is encouraged to persist miraculously in a predominantly sonic, non-semiotic traductory environment. In *Bottom: On Shakespeare* (1962) the poet writes that

The reed of the grass discloses the wind; the musical reed, moisture of breath and touch.
The voice or the tune is never seen. Riffing flows away on the shape of the riffle.
(Prepositions + 171-72)

Materials held in the Zukofsky archive reveal that he included this section of *Bottom* in his reading at the American Embassy in London, on May 21, 1969, days after the visit to Kew, and he also quotes it in the 'About the Gas Age', the central late essay that would spring from that discussion (on copied pages marked 'Reading at U.S. Embassy / London England / May 21, 1969 / Louis Zukofsky / reading from his works', held at the HRC). I would argue that Zukofsky, providentially, in the course of this crucial trip to London, detected an analogue for the homophonic practice that is so central to his late work in this Vedic hearing without seeing. In the 'Gamut' notes he goes on to transform the notes into 'he sounds invisibly', and prepares a homophonic translation of the Sanskrit line:

Strophe 4 p 218-219

sounds flow – sru

ghósa í,d asya s r h v i r e, má

<form> supám = "his sounds are heard

his form not seen"

[beta:

he sounds

his sounds

invisibly

goes as shrubbery sue[?] patron [?] flow
(over)

no-form]

invisibly[.]

The wind and rain at Kew are both matched in the Veda then, and out of them spring thought (intelligence) and a material awareness of property. 'Goes as shrubbery', Zukofsky's transliteration of the Sanskrit, is the result of this exercise; the wind and rain at Kew sounding that wind that can be heard but not seen out of the Vedas; Kew's shrubbery manifesting it. Zukofsky serendipitously locates this description of the apprehension of absence in an uncompleted, absent poem – at the same time completing his portrait of an absent London, a place that is central to his late work and yet approached only indirectly.

Conclusion

It would seem that at this point, in 1969, the divergence between Pound's and Zukofsky's Londons is clearest – this very controlled, botanical version of the city is unrecognisable either in the busy city of Pound's early poetry or, indeed, the disordered, nostalgic version of London imagined in *The Pisan Cantos*. Kew Gardens is neither those Kensington Gardens inhabited by the 'sturdy, unkillable infants of the very poor' in Pound's poem 'The Garden' (*Poems & Translations* 264), with their overlay of mingled political consciousness and disdain, nor the 'sunken garden' in danger of being lost even to memory in *Canto 80* (518). There is, nonetheless, a congruence between the writers' works at this point, for both poets adopt strange and little-known Eastern empires for their late pastoral-paradisaic explorations. Where Pound chooses the Himalayan wilderness of the Na'khi to situate the paradisaic finale of *The Cantos*, Zukofsky imagines an ordered botanical-pastoralism in the squares of the West End and at Kew.

Like Zukofsky, Pound would also attach his paradisaic process to a set of pastoral themes. By way of the Tibetan Na'khi Pound becomes interested in a series of fragrant eastern plants, in *canto 110* describing the Na'khi ceremony required to make a sacrifice to heaven:

heaven earth
in the center
is
juniper
The purifications
are snow, rain, artemisia,
also dew, oak and the juniper[.] (792)

In *80 Flowers* Zukofsky sounds 'artemisia' through that musical concern he shares with Pound:

**Art to me's hear stellary
honor never translated my sum. (*Complete Short Poetry* 347)**

This brief commentary on two of Zukofsky's most characteristic structural conceits (music and 'translation') could be a comment on the Poundian inheritance. More importantly, this example of both writers approaching the same flower reveals moments of similarity and difference in their work. Pound's botany is derived from religious rites and, unlike Zukofsky, he makes no insistence on having actually seen the plants he describes. The *80 Flowers* and 'Gamut: Trees ninety 5's' notes suggest, however, that the process may have been more similar than it initially seems. As Pound moved east towards the Himalayas for the ethnological material in *Drafts & Fragments*, Zukofsky was moving eastward also, to London.

Notes

1. The augurs were inauspicious from the beginning for Laughlin and Zukofsky. In Laughlin's first letter to Pound, in which he invited himself to the same session of the Ezuversity as Zukofsky would attend, Laughlin demands 'to know why Zukofsky has your support' (Pound and Laughlin 3) and Laughlin consistently rebuffed Zukofsky's attempts to place work with New Directions. It would not be until 2011 that "A" and *Anew: complete shorter poetry* would appear under that imprint.
2. In *Jefferson and/or Mussolini* Pound makes a direct comparison between Lenin and Mussolini, both indicating Lenin's potential importance and Mussolini's eclipsing of Lenin:

The challenge of Mussolini to America is simply:

Do the driving ideas of Jefferson, Quincy Adams, Van Buren... FUNCTION actually in the America of this decade to the extent they function in Italy under the DUCE?

The writer's opinion is that they DON'T and that nothing but vigorous realignment will make them, and that if, or when, they are made so to function, Mussolini will have acted as stimulus, will have entered in American history, as Lenin has entered world history.

That don't, or don't necessarily, mean an importation of the details of mechanisms and forms more adapted to Italy or to Russia. (104)

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