How to End a Life-Work:
Louis Zukofsky's Indexes

Abigail Lang

The paper examines the indexes in "A" and *Bottom: On Shakespeare*, the two major works of Louis Zukofsky. Why would a poet add an index to a poem? By considering various approaches to the index, from its use as a tool to be consulted casually and for cross-referencing to the other extreme, as a text in its own right, the paper elucidates the effects of the index and shows how it participates in Zukofsky's poetics. The idea for an index is rooted in Zukofsky's early conception of the word as unit. An enactment of this theory is found in *Bottom*; how Zukofsky reads Shakespeare suggests ways of reading Zukofsky. The "graph of culture" that Zukofsky attempts in *Bottom* could well be held as the matrix of the index, now seen as a table, a list of abscissae and ordinates. Finally, indexes provide an answer to the question of ending and function as signatures.

Why would a poet add an index at the end of a poem? The poet in question is Louis Zukofsky (1904-78), best known for editing, at Ezra Pound's instigation, the "Objectivist" issue of *Poetry* magazine in February 1931 and for his epic poem "A," a life-long, book-length poem of over eight hundred pages, written between 1928 and 1974. Why did Zukofsky add an index at the end of "A?" Few poets do, even with book-length poems: there are no indexes at the end of Pound's *Cantos* or of William Carlos Williams' *Paterson*. More broadly, why did Zukofsky take such an interest in indexes, the index to "A" being only the last and most striking of those the poet produced? I will attempt to establish the importance and implications of the index for Zukofsky and what it suggests in terms of closure, reading practice, signature, and the poet's conception of history.

How to end?

Bringing a long poem to a close has been a problem for American poets of the epic tradition ever since *Leaves of Grass*. Walt Whitman spent his life adding sections and reordering poems. Zukofsky, however, set the limit to what he was later to call his "poem of a life" from the very outset. He decided in 1928 that "A" would contain twenty-four sections, and twenty-four sections it does contain. By the end of the sixties he had completed "A"-1 through 21, and was beginning to think about bringing the poem to a close. Pound and Williams, two poets he had admired and corresponded with since the late twenties, certainly did not provide him with encouraging examples. Neither managed to provide their epic with a conclusive ending and Zukofsky was left to find his own solution and dare succeed where such imposing elders had failed.[1] Zukofsky's choice was to multiply endings as if he wished to distribute the burden and anxiety of concluding. The final movement, "A"-24, is a found object, or rather a received object, a gift from his wife Celia, an "unforeseen delight," as he refers to it in "A"-23 (536). Celia Zukofsky selected from several of her husband's works and set the excerpts to Handel's music. Entitled "L.Z. Masque," it is a score for five voices. For the two remaining movements, "A"-22 & 23, Zukofsky condensed six thousand years of human history into a thousand lines. The final twenty-six lines of "*A*"-23, the very final lines Zukofsky composed for "A," cite the alphabet from A to Z, on a loose acrostic-cum-mesostic model, beginning "A living Calendar, names inwreath'd" and ending "z-sited path are but us" (563). After that there is the index, entitled "Index of Names & Objects" (807), nineteen pages long, idiosyncratic in its selection of items, home and hand-made.[2]

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[1] The new collected edition of the *Cantos* (1-109) ended inconclusively. Added to the 1976 edition, the final section bears the name "Drafts and Fragments" and contains the famous statement "I cannot make it cohere" which may be read as an acknowledgment of, at least partial, defeat. Williams also left his long poem *Paterson* unfinished, publishing the fifth section in 1958 but leaving the fragments of a projected sixth part incomplete.

[2] This was before software enabled automatic indexing; the poet and his wife had to track and write down each individual occurrence to compile the index.

Inventory of items

The very presence of an index at the end of a volume of poetry is startling. Its contents are no less. It includes items usually found in indexes such as surnames, place-names, titles, events and concepts, but few. It mostly contains a large number of common nouns designating commonplace elements of everyday life, all universally shared, such as the parts of the body – *arm, belly, blood, body, breast, brain, ear, eye, face, finger, foot, hand, head, heart, mouth, knees, neck, nose, tongue, tooth, wrist* –, the parts of a tree – *branch, root, seed* –, terms describing kinship – *brother, child, family, father, mother, son* –, some animals – *bird, dog, horse.* Some items refer to urban life – *bridge, city, street, New York* – but there are many more items used by man to describe his immutable natural and cosmic surroundings: *air, dawn, day, earth, fire, moon, mountain, night, river, sea, sky, space, star, sun, water.* More abstract words seem to have been selected for their usefulness in accounting for the world: *action, art, being, cause, chance, character, death, desire, dream, form, God, good, grief, harmony, history, idea, image, imagination, infinite, justice, knowledge, labor, motion, name, nation, nature, object, order, paradise, peace, people, perfection, power, reason, science, sense, source, story, substance, time, universe, use, value, virtue, wisdom, word, work,* and *world.* The index puts together a list of terms that serve to describe the world – the five senses, the four elements, the three realms, time and weather, movement and relationships, nature and number. The index provides a minimal glossary, a survival kit to account for the physical and metaphysical world.

Even more striking, perhaps, is the fact that the index includes the articles "a, "an," and "the," each naturally followed by a very great number of references to numerous pages. Zukofsky's original intent was actually to limit "A"'s index to the inventory of the three articles. His wife Celia expanded it and Louis then revised it (Quartermain, *Disjunctive Poetics* 207). Zukofsky's passion for articles goes back to his very first poem, entitled "Poem beginning 'The'," for the demonstrative, deictic article that inaugurates the poem (*Complete Short Poetry* 8). Its three-hundred-and-thirty lines are individually numbered in the left margin. This gives the poem the appearance of an anti-index, or a reversed index: each line begins with a number followed by a train of words. "*A*" is also entitled after its first word, and "A"-12 through "A"-24 all begin with the article "an." In his 1946 essay "Poetry," Zukofsky justifies the title of his two major poems by contending that articles are appropriate,

if surprising, topics for an epic: "a case can be made out for the poet giving some of his life to the use of the words *the* and *a*: both of which are weighted with as much epos and historical destiny as one man can perhaps resolve" (*Prepositions* 10). How does Zukofsky link the epic, "a poem containing history" in Pound's words, and the inconspicuous articles?

"A"-22 & 23, the two final movements which Zukofsky composed as summaries of human history, display a striking lack of names. "History's best emptied of names" (511), Zukofsky claims in "A"-22, which he conceived in his preparatory notes as "a history without (the) dates" (HRC B21 new a). The impulse to write history without dates and names goes back a long way in Zukofsky's work, most noticeably to the 1930s. Names were already excluded from a passage in *Thanks to the Dictionary*, an early fiction: they were deleted and replaced by blanks. *A Test of Poetry*, Zukofsky's poetry textbook, an equivalent of Pound's *ABC of Reading*, is a literary history without names and dates: two sections out of three provide poems and selections without names of authors or dates. These are given in a final table now entitled "Chronological Chart" but initially drafted on tracing paper as "Index of Object Matter noticed in this volume."

In the 1930s, another project confirmed for Zukofsky the possibility of writing the history of single objects and forgotten individuals, such as craftsmen: the *Index of American Design*. In the second half of the thirties, Zukofsky was employed by the Works Progress Administration and the Federal Art Project to put together an illustrated record of the tradition of American crafts, or in Zukofsky's words, "a graphic survey of American decorative arts and crafts from the earliest Colonial days to the beginnings of large-scale production." The *Index of American Design* rested on the ideology of the everyday, as the pamphlet announcing the project argued: "the past of a nation is to be reconstructed from the humble articles of utility no less than from the record of great events" (qtd. in Nadel 113).

A history without dates or names is a history without those milestones which usually *make* History but fail to account for the life and the world of the past, the common and commonplace: "Scribes conceive history as tho/ sky, sun, men never were" writes Zukofsky in "A"-22 (522). "A" in general and "A"-22 & 23 in particular are attempts to put that right and the index reflects this attempt. That is why it contains so many common nouns such as *sky*, *sun* and *man*. Unlike names, which

postulate a *unique* object, common nouns and articles imply a *single* object. The articles "a," "an" and "the" radicalize this stand[3]. By being so common, both frequently used and shared by all, they stand for the common run of people, things and places, for those history has not singled out, for all that lack the unique characteristics that would earn them a monumental capital letter.

Inventory of effects

The index to "A" is its appendix, caudal and digital. It rounds off the text, but also invites the reader to return to it, to begin anew, with the benefit of the first or previous reading, but also the benefit of the index. The circularity of the poem is already suggested by its very first words: "A / round" (1). By sifting, screening, riddling the text, and selecting certain words, the index calls attention to these terms, which take on added value. The list of page references that is their train, a trailing section of varied length, indicates their rank in a hierarchy of frequency. By isolating a word out of context, the index invites the reader to look at the basic notion, and to ponder on one of Zukofsky's early "objectivist" axioms, which posits "the entirety of the single word, which is in itself a relation, an implied metaphor, an arrangement and a harmony" ("Sincerity and Objectification" 279). Released from the flow of sentence and line, the word catches the attention of the reader whose mind can wander freely, play with letters, toy with polysemy. The index integrates contingency: by arranging words in alphabetical order, it creates a list, and unexpected juxtapositions spark off new meanings. As a list, the index isolates and calls attention to the word in isolation. But as a tool for convenient reference, it has the opposite effect: it points the reader back to the text, using short-cuts; it invites him to return to the word in context or to read the several occurrences of the word in a row, comparing contexts.

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[3] The indefinite article implies an object chosen at random among its class or species, whereas the definite article, retaining the memory of its deictic function, points towards a selected object, is an indicator, an index. But both "a" and "the" point to an individual from a class or species of similar objects.

How to read? Pinpointing recurrences

One way to learn how to read Zukofsky is to watch him read. *Bottom: On Shakespeare* displays Zukofsky reading. A disconcerting work, *Bottom: On Shakespeare* is a collage of quotations, a reading of Shakespeare, a history of Western philosophy, and a defense of "the clear physical eye against the erring brain" (*Prepositions* 167). How does Zukofsky read Shakespeare? First, he considers the whole work as a homogeneous and synchronic field of investigation – "It is simpler to consider the forty-four items of the canon as one work [. . .] always regardless of time in which it was composed" (*Bottom* 13) – a position later made into a watchword "Begin anywhere" (*Bottom* 28). Then, recurrences of a word are tracked and occurrences compared. Zukofsky reads Shakespeare with, or as if he was reading him with an index. For instance, it is by comparing the occurrences of the word *table* that Zukofsky can rebuke an editor who changed Shakespeare's text to make the meaning more understandable by deleting the word:

> Elsewhere in Shakespeare there is this use of *table* meaning *tablet* for writing something to remember, or a *flat surface* for painting [. . .] Besides its use works in with Shakespeare's art of recurrence of images, like musical notes, that articulates the *definition of love* sounding precisely thru all its plays. (*Bottom* 290)

A large part of *Bottom* is devoted to pinpointing occurrences of the word "eyes" and other terms linked to eyesight, throughout the plays: "I have never counted the variations on *eyes* in *A Midsummer-Night's Dream* (1595). [. . .] A count of the word *eyes* in the other plays and poems would prove just as considerable" (*Bottom* 283). Such patient pinpointing implies that a text is not only to be read in succession, from left to right, from top to bottom, but from occurrence to occurrence, with an index.

Graph (of culture)

Bottom: on Shakespeare also has an index, put together by Zukofsky in the early sixties, a decade before the index in "A." *Bottom*'s index was initially referred to as: "AN INDEX / uncharted / TO SEE" (HRC D5 c). This can be taken to mean, first, that the index is worth seeing, worth reading as a text; or, secondly, that it helps one to see, that it is enlight-

ening; or, thirdly, that it is dedicated to his wife Celia: to C. The word *uncharted* may suggest that this is virgin territory, an index devoid of landmarks; or, on the contrary, it can mean that the index only records high points, landmarks, without drawing the curve that links them. In that sense, the index is akin to the graph of culture.

The expression *"Graph: Of Culture"* first appears in an inventory of abandoned or interrupted projects which Zukofsky lists at the end of "A"-12 (257). It also appears as an entry in *Bottom*'s index and the page references that follow suggest that the project was not abandoned but incorporated to form the bulk of *Bottom*: "Culture, a graph, 33-443" (450). Incidentally, the reference to 410 consecutive pages makes the index entry useless for tracking down the recurrences of the term. What this graph of culture refers to is far from clear.[4] The graph of culture that Zukofsky attempts to trace in *Bottom* would show the degree of re-alization throughout consecutive civilizations of the following formula: *"love : reason : : eyes : mind,"* which reads *"love is to reason as the eyes are to the mind*; or, says it so that *means* equal *extremes*: when reason judges with the eyes, love and mind are one" and which Zukofsky also calls the "definition of love" (266-267).

I believe that Zukofsky may have borrowed the idea of the graph from Henry Adams, whose *Education* and *Degradation of the Democratic Dogma* deeply and lastingly influenced the poet's conception of history. Adams believed that the study of history must become a science exactly comparable to the physical sciences. A section of *Degradation* entitled "The Rule of Phase Applied to History" (1909) is crucially relevant to the project of the graph of culture, which may have been triggered by the following sentences:

> Any school-boy could plot on a sheet of paper in abscissae and ordinates the points through which the curve of thought passed, as fixed by the val-ues of the men and their inventions or discoveries. History offers no other demonstration to compare with it, and the more because the curve shows plainly that the new lines of Force or Thought were induced lines, obeying the laws of mass, and not those of self-induction. (Adams 288)

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[4] Here is what comes closest to a definition of it: "Limited to plot regularity while it (G of C) keeps time for historic singulars, it fixes these in proportions that show their inex-pressible trust of expression only with respect to the sameness in them. Instead of as-serting like Timaeus only the likely story of the wholeness of a world *as it is*, the graph of culture despite its apparently unphysiological structure also affects that being bodily, that which comes to be must be visible" (*Bottom* 91).

The verb that Zukofsky constantly uses to introduce the words "graph of culture" is *to plot*, which means: "to make a ground-plan, map, or diagram of (an existing object); mark (a point or course) on a chart or diagram. Also, mark out or allocate (points) on a graph, make (a curve, etc.) by marking out a number of points on a graph" (*OED*). At one point in *Bottom* Zukofsky describes the graph of culture as "Trust on graph paper" (92).

The graph of culture is an attempt to record culture, but not as a historian would, narrating events and providing logical transitions from one to the next. A very large portion of *Bottom*, and hence of the graph of culture is made up of juxtaposed quotations, without explanation, Zukofsky's version of Pound's ideogrammic method. Instead of narrating past thought and culture, Zukofsky compares events that are widely apart in time and space. His reading practice is always anti-chronological. In a 1951 letter he writes, "The test of literature is that you feel you would be that man or are that man when you read"; and in a 1954 letter, he adds that "the test of poetry is to make the past present" (HRC J28). This is a version of Pound's famous statement, "All ages are contemporaneous"(*The Spirit of Romance* 6). Zukofsky is more interested in singulars than in movements, especially in what he terms *contingencies*, when two similar thoughts arise in different places, at different times and "sound one" ("A"-23, 539). In a characteristic passage he compares the thoughts of Aristotle, Spinoza, Shakespeare and Wittgenstein. His interest lies in milestones and contingent recurrences, an approach very similar to that imposed by an index. His graph of culture is not a complete curve, but a series of landmarks whose relative heights suggest rather than trace a ridge, a crest, a watershed.

An index to the graph of culture, I would contend that *Bottom's* index is a data version of the graph itself, its matrix, its list of coordinates. A table, it provides easy routes between beginning and end, each point accessible by horizontal and vertical translation, down the list of items or across the series of page numbers. The index attempts to approximate the curve of the graph of culture. The items Zukofsky selects for the index punch holes in his card of culture. The information given by an index is binary: either a word appears in it or it does not, the space taken up by the list of page references amplifying this initial information. Chart of sea to the Graph of C., the index is also a series of file indexes, of perforated cards, a primitive computer. It is a further and more ambitious attempt to satisfy the program of *A Test of Poetry*, to

provide a "clean tablet of conscience" with "tabulated results," to meet, at least formally, Adams's demand for a scientific history. Showing rather than telling, it also embodies Zukofsky's defiance for what he calls, after Adams, "the Gas Age" (*Prepositions* 169). Zukofsky believed that the period from Shakespeare and Spinoza onwards was hopelessly intellectual, gaseous, vaporous, and the index also embodies his preference for the tangible, whether visual and tactile, for contingencies and contiguities.

Files, life, and love

Can everything be filed? In a manuscript note written while he was patiently preparing the index for *Bottom* on index cards, Zukofsky wrote that everything and everyone could be filed, except his loved ones, his wife and son, who could not be indexed but were the source that made the other items necessary. Something undetermined in his love for them made them "the life" as opposed to the file, a life of love as opposed to a file of order. Thought can be boxed and indexed, but love and life cannot be filed. They are the source, what makes the ordering necessary, what justifies the patient filing of index cards as love's labor. And love can hide in a letter, as Zukofsky claims and exemplifies with his numerous puns on his wife's and his own initials.

Signature (How to end 2)

Once again, how to end? "A" multiplies endings, but also multiplies Zukofsky's signature, a sign of ownership and endorsement. Before the final "Index of Names & Objects," "A"-24 already contains an index, signed. It ends with a short poem to Celia: "the gift − / she hears / the work / in its recurrence" signed "L.Z." and a thank you note signed by both Celia and Louis and addressed to their only son Paul: "C.Z./ L.Z." (806). The final alphabetical portion of "A"-23 ends with a line, the final line composed by Zukofsky in his life-work "A," which begins with the poet's initial: "z-sited path are but us" (563). The general index also ends with a word beginning with Z: Zion, the final word in "A," disregarding the running title "index" at the bottom of the page.

Bottom also splits up its end and closes with an index. In *Bottom*, the chapter "Z (signature)" closes the body of the text, the "Zukofsky" item closes the index and the letter "Z" closes the list of references. The final letter of the alphabet, the Z is Zukofsky's initial, a fact physically experienced by Zukofsky scholars who must always browse the bottom shelf. Why such closure and circularity is important is hinted at in the only occurrence in "A" of the word "index":

> "That thunders in
> the Index" Imagine,
> said Celia, selling
>
> the movie rights
> to *Bottom: on*
> *Shakespeare*. No
>
> index was whole
> so our index
> will sometimes lead
>
> us to us (336)

The index, as hopelessly patchy filing of history and attempt at a graph of culture leads Zukofsky back to "us" (lower-case U and S), that is to himself and his family, to the domestic cell, the common run of people, forgotten by history. Though he never gave up his attempt to account for the world, towards the end of his life, Zukofsky increasingly withdrew from the world and grew distrustful of history, as "A"'s final movements exemplify.

How Not To End?

Once the work was so neatly rounded, from "A" to Z, the world so completely accounted for, how was Zukofsky to go on? How was "A"'s index not to be a dead-end? How was the poet to renew his astoundingly alphabetical bibliography: *"A"*, *All*, *Anew*, *Arise*, *Arise*, *A Test of Poetry*, *Autobiography*, *Barely & Widely*, *Bottom*, and finally *Catullus*? Zukofsky's final book of poems manages to escape the alphabet by beginning with digits, *80 Flowers*, in Roman numerals. It is, among other things, a condensation of all his previous work, a sort of Duchampian box-in-a-

suitcase, to ward off and accept death: Zukofsky would not live to see his eightieth year flower. The seeds of the coming flowers are already sown in "A"'s index: *African violet, Aloe, Anemone, Azalea, Bayberry, Chicory, Chrysanthemum, Clover, Crocus, Daisy, Dandelion, Dogwood,* down to *Windflower,* though not yet *Zinnia.*

In the wake of the epic tradition, Zukofsky made his own attempt to renew the conception of history, oscillating between chronology and contemporaneity of ages, between a mathematical approach and an alphabetical one. As an alphanumerical device, the index stands at the crossroads, consonant with Zukofsky's poetics and its unresolved tension between the impulse to order, generalize, account scientifically for all events with a simple, elegant mathematical formula and his love of particulars, facts, details and happy contingencies.

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