



“A”

Louis Zukofsky

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Louis Zukofsky's most important poetic work now returns to print in a new softcover edition.

“A” Details

Date : Published October 1st 1993 by Johns Hopkins University Press (first published 1959)

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Author : Louis Zukofsky

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From Reader Review “A” for online ebook

Nothing says

please may i have my breath back?

tENTATIVELY, cONVENIENCE says

review of

Louis Zukofsky's "A"

by tENTATIVELY, a cONVENIENCE - May 5, 2013

Lardy, I get tired of writing things like this: ***"Review is too long. You entered 39826 characters, and the max is 20000"***. In other words, if you want to read the full review, go here:

<http://www.goodreads.com/story/show/3...>

I knew about Paul Zukofsky, Louis' son, before I ever encountered mention of Louis. Paul's a violinist, Paul's probably the 1st violinist I ever started thinking of as a 'great violinist' - probably largely b/c his repertoire was so appealing to me. The 1st records I ever got by him were the double-record set of Ives' "Sonatas for Violin & Piano" - wch I got in early 1975 when I was a mere 21 yr old. I'm listening to that now as I write this. Later that yr I got the excellent Mainstream label's "New Music for Violin and Piano" w/ works on it by George Crumb, Charles Wuorinen, Isang Yun, & John Cage. Both of these publications also feature the piano playing of Gilbert Kalish. Somewhere along the line I heard a record of Zukofsky playing solo violin works by Glass & Scelsi & ?. Eventually I picked up the excellent box-set entitled "Music for a 20th Century Violinist" w/ works by Shapey, Rieger, Cage, Crumb, Mennin, Feldman, Sahl, Brant, Wolpe, Piston, Sessions, Babbitt, Berger, & Sollberger - again w/ Kalish. Paul was a man after my own 'heart' - someone largely dedicated to 20th century classical, mostly 'avant-garde'.

It probably wasn't until a few yrs later, perhaps thru "L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E" magazine articles, that I started reading about Paul's dad Louis' giant poem "A". It was intriguing to me, apparently of great intellectual substance. Nonetheless, studying music, for me, is a whole different ball of earwax than reading poetry so I didn't FINALLY get around to reading it until NOW, April-May, 2013.

I recently read & reviewed Iannis Xenakis' Formalized Music wch was such a heavy intellectual dose that I felt the 'need' to take a break & take an easier joy-ride thru 8 back-to-back Jules Verne novels. Reading "A" brought me back to challenging myself again. &, yet, in the end, while "A" was certainly challenging, "A" was much more of a pleasant read than I expected. I even read it pretty quickly. Of course, I have the attitude that I think many readers of poetry have: that I don't 'have to' understand it, just experience it.

As for 'understanding' it, Barry Ahearn's excellent introduction (in this 2011 New Directions edition) went a long way to helping. Ahearn writes that "We sit at the poet's elbow as he writes, walk with him through the streets of Brooklyn, read his correspondence, and listen to the talk of his father, wife, and son. Zukofsky was quite serious in stressing the degree to which his poem was "of a life"—his life." (p vii) Much has been made of Language Writing's removal of the subject position from poetry. I'm all for that as ONE strategy for writing - not as dogma. A pet peeve of mine is that many people who've probably removed the "I" from their

writing probably don't really have much of an "**I**" to write about anyway - at least from my perspective.

In other words, some people live a life that I find worth writing about, they/we live to set examples of the possible (amongst other things). I'm not sure that Louis did. But what Louis apparently did was lead an intensely intellectual & politically thoughtful life & the manifestation of that in "A" is good enuf for me.

Ahearn continues: ""Hermetic" implies a text impossibly abstruse." (p viii) I don't think that's necessarily accurate. To me, hermeticism is a philosophical approach that metaphorically opens doors that lead to other doors, that asks questions that lead to other questions - & that can seem "abstruse" if one doesn't understand the usefulness to developing open-mindedness that such an approach can have.

Ahearn quotes Louis Zukofsky as saying "*The best way to read me is literally*" (p viii) & then Ahearn adds that "paying attention to the simple facts on the page—reading him literally—has some limitations. As "A"-12 observes: "Everything should be as simple as it *can* be, / Says Einstein, / But not simpler." (p x) The quote in context being on p 143 of "A". Now in "A"-12, written from 1950-1951, Zukofsky writes in epistolary form: "What struck you, as / I think you meant, choppy in / "A", 13 years or so" [ie: in "A"-8 &/ or the 1st half of "A"-9] "or so back when / I tried hard for the "fact," I / reread sometimes to tie in with / what goes on now, and the "fact" / is not so hard-set as a paradigm. / I have to reread several times / to find out what I meant." (pp 214-215) If the author has to reread it in order to understand it, then, we the not-so-privileged reader are not going to be able to so easily identify "the simple facts". "Like the sea fishing / Constantly fishing / Its own waters" (p 215) & by the time we get to the last section written, "A"-23 (1973-1974), I think it's safe to claim that "paying attention to the simple facts on the page" has become considerably more remote:

"animal probities father risk. Keys
punt: arbors tutor us: air
is, air is, short or
long sounds air's measure. In
toga—chord: release—pine, dewed
olives, damn papyrus, method, blot
of famine. Cart a new
case: fritt'll lose? Stave lucre." - p 552

What this brings up for me is the notion of 'literal' 'vs' 'figurative': what is 'literal'? what is 'figurative'? "Literal" is usually used to mean "actual" & "figurative" is usually used to mean as-in-figuratively: ie: as in a "figure-of-speech": ie: not meant to be actually descriptive but as more as a metaphor. However, to me, the etymology of the words implies the *opposite* of their typical usage: "literal" meaning related-to-literature, related-to-language itself *rather than* "figurative" meaning related-to-figure, meaning related-to-an-embodied-shape. Therefore, reading Zukofsky "*literally*" wd mean to read the writing as *language* 1st & foremost - bringing us to Language Writing - wch is what the excerpt from p 552 above reminds me of.

On the other hand, I'd called the title of the bk, "A", more *figurative*, in my terms, b/c: "Horses" [...] "For they have no eyes, for their legs are wood, / For their stomachs are logs with print on them" [...] "two legs stand A, four together M. / "Street Closed" is what print says on their stomachs" ("A"-7, p 39) In other words, "A" is used for its visual graphic quality, for its shape: a capital "A" looks like 2 of the 4 legs of a saw-horse. "Then I — Are logs?! Two legs stand "A"" (p 40) "Be necks, two legs stood A, four together M" (p 41) Predictably (to me, at least), I'm reminded of "Ceci n'est pas une pipe" ("This is not a pipe") - the text under a painting depicting a pipe - courtesy of the painter Rene Magritte - to wch I might add here: "This "A" is not a pair of saw-horse legs" - not only b/c it's a symbol & not the object referred to, but also b/c the "A" doesn't have a

gap in the top for the horizontal board to rest in. The "literal/figurative" vacillates in meaning like a figure-ground ambiguity. Ahearn: "Words are grounded in physical facts." (p xiii) Are the saw-horse legs broken or out-of-wack when "A" is *italicized*: "A"?!

Horses are used w/ a similar multiplicity as "A" is. In "A"-12, there's what I take to be a quote from & a reaction to a very young child: ""Then he put / His horse into / His pocketbook" / And you can't put / A horse into / A pocketbook / Even an old horse — Despite what Lorine's tiny neighbor / Told her the night / She was a rich sitter." (p 137) What if the pocketbook is made of horse leather? What if the pocketbook is a notebook & the horse that's put in is a drawing of one?

"

— Look, Paul, where
The sawhorses of "A" — 7
Have brought me.

In the eighth month
In the second year of Darius
I saw by night —
" - p 228

This is probably from the ancient Jewish writing of Zechariah but I chose to quote L.Z.'s quoting of it partially b/c I recognize a pun when I come upon one. Just like I recognize a Spoonerism when I come across one. Or maybe I don't. I WAS going to quote: "I make my money by my hobby.' / His very honey is his lobby." (p 296) &, see?, I DID quote it. But is it a Spoonerism? Or just a rhyme? The "h" of hobby replaces the "m" of money but the "h" of hobby is replaced, in turn, by an "I" instead of the "m". WELL, the "I" is one letter before "m" in alphabetical order so it's close enuf for me. Alas, according to multiple online sources, spoonerisms are named after the Reverend William Archibald Spooner's tendency to accidentally generate them. I wd've been much happier if they'd deliberately originated w/ the individualist anarchist Lysander Spooner.

Then there's language as spoken: "the American language as she is spoke (oreye mush blige), the ballad of Frankie and Johnie, the poem "Look at Johnie was a man,"" (pp 615-616)

& what about "Catullus played Bach"? (p 344) The famous poet (ca. 84–54 BC) predates the famous composer (1685–1750AD) so maybe a different Catullus is referred to? One that I've never heard of? Methinks L.Z. is fucking w/ us here.

I've always been attracted to "A" as a title b/c of its function as a gateway into a lexical system & I liked it even more as I read Zukofsky's exploitation of the broadness of such possibilities: "Lime, phosphorous and vitamin "A"" (p 64), "Hiroshima's "A"" (p 426) - as in "A-Bomb", presumably.

"A"-14 cd be sd to have this title: "beginning *An*" followed by stanzas the 1st of wch is:

"
An
orange
our
sun
fire

pulp
" - p 314

& the 5th of wch is:

"

*First of
eleven songs
beginning An*
" - p 315

If this is to be taken to mean that "A"-14 is the "*First of / eleven songs / beginning An*" then "A"'s title's meaning can be further enriched to be the article "A" & one can, perhaps, deduce that each of "A"'s remaining sections, 14-24, is a 'song'. & 15 *does* begin w/ "An", the 2nd stanza of wch is:

"

He neigh ha lie low h'who y'he gall mood
So roar cruel hire
Lo to achieve an eye leer rot off
Mass th'lo low o loam echo
How deal me many coeval yammer
Naked on face of white rock—sea.
Then I said: Liveforever my nest
Is arable hymn
Shore she root to water
Dew anew to branch.
" - p 359

[I'm listening to "New Music for Violin & Piano" now]

The above seems Joycean to me, I reckon it's a reference/take-off to/of something specific. I don't know. Whatever it is, I love the language.

There's more marvelous language hear than ,U, can Shake "A" Speare at:

"

'What nature delights in' says Savage 'the observer
on the level with the object: a shell
reversed no false ornament, moss and fern stuck
with root outward, a crystal sparkling at bottom
or top, loose soil or plashing water; rudeness
is here no blemish' the emasculated conception: 'A
man who hates children and dogs can't be
all male vicieuse.' Demolition: what fears of tears
their hateful deference water for mash: Hell
a mood (that hollow word!) His Friday's pun
Good but does not pass for that: an
opera's mournful wail 'Bye-Bye Brook-a-leen-a'
portent I shivered to as a kid: a Sicilian

brass band blaring Brahms' march to the 6-foot blot
what Mad King pawn braiding his pubic hairs
Divine *comedy*. We'll move from our belongings disposed
of in a song '*Kwanon, sine qua non*'
" - p 402

"

L.E. Nip & Tuck Jimtown Rake Pocket
CH. Hog Eye Steal Easy Possum Trot
" - 459

I've been too lazy to quote the full dialog begun above. This is the 3rd day of writing this review. "A" was written intermittently over 46 yrs, it's not my intention to spend as many yrs reviewing it. Jimtown Joyce & Finnegans Rake Pocket.

& what about "whoobsx"? It appears at least twice in "A" (pp 55 & 492).

"

her on, acclaim's own sun
go new *on. Rector of*
ox-stealers (May's born) *a*
varied finger, tortoise tasting th'
odoriferous grass, means to live
love-thee-ever, virtuous his home contént:
inform'd a lute twinklings' eye
rich (off and on and)
apt to learn—sought out
integrity, desire to light up
reverencing with his soul the
Sun to all Earth's sweetest
air exposed, reaps infinite acres
a new voice lording swindle
house-break, shop-lift—a song worth
50 cows. "*Ho, old man!*"
you grub these stumps before
they will bear wine? (old
animal no Dogwood shaft) Attend
advice: Seeing, see not; hearing,
hear not: and—if you
have understanding, understand."
(His gain mother earth—pant
on—I sum it up)
happy (when) glory invests his
sons fit means to live:
when the sun's evening's horses
down, to stand its rise
some time his own. Agave:
" - p 546

Maybe it's just me, maybe it's just my expectations - but it seems like LZ's poetic shorthand means & unmeans faster & faster, fluidly, fluidity, as he gets older. The above is from the last section he wrote: "A"-23 (1973-1974).

"

Whether it was 'impossible for matter to think?'

Duns Scotus posed.

Unbodily substance is an absurdity
like unbodily body. It is impossible
to separate thought and matter that thinks.

" - p 46

"

The simple will be discovered beneath the complex
Then the complex under the simple
Then again the simple under the complex
And, and, the chain without sight of the last term, etc., Etc.,

" - p 47

Indeed. Note that he writes "term", presumably meant to be a mathematical word, rather than "link", a word more commonly associated w/ "chain" in description of the object. Sometimes I have formal questions such as: Why 2 couplets in the midst of all 3 line stanzas on pp 273-274? I tend to experience the work formally, to note things as musical lines, perhaps. EG: the only line in the Poetry of pp 640-679 is a repetition of the phrase "Voice a voice blown, returning as May". B/c such a repetition is an anomaly, it has a strong presence for me.

16 begins w/ "An", 17 w/ "Anemones" - ie: IF, as w/ 14 ("beginning *An*"), we reject the title ("A CORONAL") as the beginning. The process of defining, or, at least, *thinking about* what constitutes a beginning & what doesn't seems to be part & parcel of what pronouncing "*First of/ eleven songs/ beginning An*" might prompt. 18 begins "An unearthing", 19, "An other" - yet another variation. 20 bends the rules anew by having "An" be the 1st (& only) word whose placement is far left of the rest of the text - nonetheless, NOT the 1st word - either of the title or the stanzas. Similarly, 21 cd be sd to 'begin' w/ a title, then a subtitle, then a stage instruction in parentheses *before* we get to "*an 'twere any nightingale.* (p 438) As such, the stage instruction is *excluded* from the poem. 22 has the appearance of a title being:

"

**AN ERA
ANYTIME
OF YEAR**

" - p 508

B/c of the above precedents set, we can deduce that this ISN'T the title but is, indeed, the beginning of the poem. Perhaps this is trivial. To me, we're being shown variations, possibilities. 23 begins: "An unforeseen delight a round". (p 536) & Celia Zukofsky's contribution, the last of the "*eleven songs/ beginning An*" does 'begin' w/ "And it is possible in imagination". This tying together implies an overall long-term vision, or, at least, the illusion of one. Given that 14 & 15 were written in 1964 & that 16, 17, & 20 were written in 1963, it cd be that when 14 was written the "An" of 20 was further left-justified to make it retrofit. & how did C.Z.'s contribution work out? Was she aware of this "An"-beginning strategy? Was it a coincidence? Presumably, it was deliberate. The plot thickens.

"If we find ourselves lost in segments of "A" where meaning utterly escapes us, the fault lies not with the poem, but with our constrained definition of meaning." (p xiii) Ha ha! If there's fault to be placed *anywhere* aren't some presuppositions 'necessary'? If a bridge is built, its purpose is commonly taken for granted as being to facilitate the passage over a body of water or a valley or some other obstacle. If the bridge collapses or only goes partway then there're fairly clear criteria for considering it to be a failure - but if "meaning utterly escapes us" in a poem what're the criteria for declaring any 'failure' or 'success' as being involved? Sometimes, poetry can be a type of shorthand where the poet is packing as much meaning into a restricted space as they're capable of - this, for me, evokes my own expression: "TTQ-EA" (Thoughts Too Quick - Expressions Anachronistic): ie: the poetry is a way of enabling fast thought to be expressed in compacted symbols.

But when it comes time for the reader to unpack it, if there's no clearly common way of doing so shared between the author's intent & the reader's interpretation then the "fault" is not necessarily *anywhere* - the reader & the writer are sharing whatever they have to share & that differs from instance to instance. Some may find that situation unsatisfactory.

The relevance of Paul in all this, & a thing that enriched the text for me enormously, is the presence of music references throughout & the references to young Paul's budding skill w/ & interest in the violin. But unlike w/ Paul, Louis' musical interests seem to be mostly baroque, largely w/ the Bach family. Ahearn: "We learn in "A"-8 that the turning of a mill wheel helped Veit Bach, an ancestor of Johann Sebastian Bach, to keep time as he played his flute." (p xii) It seems to me that Louis stresses the Bach family as much as he does to draw parallels w/ the also-phenomenally musical Zukofsky family. Not only is Paul a great musician, but Louis' wife Celia is a composer who sets poems to music.

Ahearn: "Rhythms of the past return to consort with modern cadences. The whole poem, in fact, is a masterpiece of rhythmic invention and recuperation. / Therefore we might consider "A" a collaborative poem, uniting disparate voices across the centuries. The poet's wife, Celia, unwittingly became part of that process when in 1968 she composed the *L.Z. Masque*, a selection of her husband's writing set to music by Handel. Celia drew on a variety of her husband's works, including a play, essays, a story, and "A" itself. her choice of accompanying music from the eighteenth century is appropriate in two respects. First, it pays tribute to a composer who was Bach's exact contemporary (both he and Handel were born in 1685), and therefore amplifies the musical theme present since "A"-1." [...] Louis Zukofsky's "delight was such that he decided to include it in the poem as the concluding movement, "A"-24." (p xiv) It's worth noting that this "concluding movement" constitutes 243 pages of the work's total 806 pages (not including the index)! & it is a very remarkable conclusion indeed!!

Jonfaith says

**My sweet unworded, we fall into disuse,
The sense that attached to us persists
Despite the yellow page of local history**

Sir Edmund Hilary encounters Roberto Duran(1), a meeting burnished in fugue -- one containing labor history and untranslated fragments, replete with diacritics and yet the parts are parsed even reduced to a winding single file of syllables. Matters could go strophic, but they don't. They bend and ultimately creep, transformed into notation, an honoring of the sonic sublime. This is akin to the Cantos. What emerges from this forty year endeavor is man's love for his family. He simply didn't need to be so obscure. There is a debt

to Pound and the flesh will be freed, if only by a technicality. Modernity left such stolid names why do we then yearn for an infinite addition. Pangloss would be proud. It is intriguing that Zukofsky was so enamored with Henry Adams; Pynchon was as well.

1) It was there and I can't handle any more. I viewed youtube readings by Charles Olson last night and I find myself cured.

Jeff Laughlin says

I may never stop reading this book. I may never finish it.

R. G. says

My rating of this book is beside the point. Do I think I understand "A"? Do I think everyone will enjoy reading "A"? No and no again. I have been bumping up against Zukofsky's poetry for over 30 years for the exhilaration of it. The texture of thought contained in the book is extraordinary. I started "A" again while reading Mark Scroggins' biography, *The Poem of a Life*, and felt my comprehension (on several levels, at least) was finally improving. A book for explorers of the 20th century mind in poetry - not another great book to tic off a list.

Michael says

Zukofsky's enormous poem is the last major work of modernist poetry by an American. It's stunning in its range, complexity, hermeticism, and formal accomplishment. "A" is notoriously difficult, but isn't anything new, enlightening, and beautiful difficult? In any case, Zukofsky's difficulties are a pleasure:

An impulse to action sings of a semblance
Of things related as equated values,
The measure all use is time congealed labor
In which abstraction things keep no resemblance
To goods created; integrated all hues
Hide their natural use to one or one's neighbor.
So that were the things words they could say: Light is
Like night is like us when we meet our mentors
Use hardly enters into their exchanges,
Bought to be sold things, our value arranges;
We flee people who made us as a right is
Whose sight is quick to choose us as frequenters,
But see our centers do not show the changes
Of human labor our value estranges.

Just *listen* to that (and if you haven't read it aloud, you haven't listened to it.) Sure the syntax is complicated, but you can work it all out in time. It may or may not help to know that in this passage, Zuk is quoting Marx while keeping exactly (right down to the rhyming sounds) the form of Guido Cavalcanti's 14th century

canzone "Donna mi Priegha". Anyhow, listen to it. It sounds like bells.

Something of a critical industry is developing around Zukofsky, in much the same way it's been built up around Joyce, Pound, etc. It's nice that attention to Zuk has been growing, but I'm hoping that average readers aren't scared away. The poem is innovative and formally challenging, yes, but it's no bloodless exercise in literary modernism. Zukofsky can sometimes be maddeningly difficult or obscure, but isn't everyone?

This is one of the books I'm always reading, and always will. I'm really looking forward to seeing what this poem will be like in thirty years or so.

Marley says

Some of this I adore. Some of this is too abstruse for me the first read through, as Zukofsky is never going to talk down to his readers, or even bother to give them an entry to his mind. But there's a wonderful collection of fragments in here about passing on wisdom, and pastoralism, and the life of Bach and being a sad Marxist watching the world crack open for World War II, and the plays of Euripides and Aristophanes, and about growing up, and old, in that ridiculous 20th century many of us saw the tail-end of. I won't re-read this for a long time, but I'm glad I made it through.

Mike Lindgren says

The career of Louis Zukofsky (1904–1978) has been overlooked by all but the most fervent students of American poetry, a situation that legendary house New Directions hopes to correct with its double-barreled publication of Zukofsky's book-length epic "A" and *Anew*, a somewhat less menacing companion volume of shorter poems. To call Zukofsky an acquired taste would be an understatement; an 826-page opus of remarkable density, "A" has long held a shadowy legendary status as a stark obelisk of high modernism, the verse equivalent of *Finnegan's Wake*. The poems collected in *Anew* are accessible only by comparison, and represent a body of work that, taken alone, would qualify Zukofsky as a major figure in American modernism.

While *Anew* shows a progression of experimentation as a kind of running dialogue with Eliot, Pound, and Williams, all of whom were Zukofsky's peers, "A" is unlike anything else this reader, who has been studying and analyzing poetry in academic and professional contexts for over a quarter century, has ever encountered. The self-contained poetic universe of "A," Zukofsky's life's work, spans five decades of American life and contains a dizzying array of prosodic techniques, from torrential free verse to rigorous rhymed stanzas to terse minimalist tone sketches, including long passages written in a rolling, beautiful, and archaic-sounding imaginary Renaissance language of Zukofsky's own invention. In other sections it ruthlessly breaks language down into the smallest units of sound possible, a process as radically inventive as that practiced by any subsequent, and more celebrated, avant-garde; it is rife with puns, spoonerisms, homophones, double-entendres, and other forms of wordplay; it is formidably allusive, conducting a thematic conversation with the mental and aesthetic achievements of Bach, Marx, Henry Adams, Shakespeare, Vico, Spinoza, classical

theology, quantum physics, and many other artists and fields; it includes soaring passages depicting the Great Depression, World War II, the assassination of John F. Kennedy, and the Vietnam War alongside sequences of great domestic and connubial tenderness.

Perhaps most radically of all, the staggering scope and range of Zukofsky's great poem demand a redefinition of the act of reading. Unless you are a doctoral candidate in English literature or other specialist, there is no practical way to attack "A" except to surrender to it, riding its relentless and incantatory language in a kind of mental surfing. Such surrender is not easy to achieve or to sustain, but this vast and genuinely unique piece of writing repays the patience and willingness necessary to enter a trance-like state of receptiveness with a vivid and hallucinatory literary experience.

In reading Zukofsky I kept thinking of Jonathan Franzen's celebrated 2002 essay "Mr. Difficult." Franzen understands—better than any of his peers, I think—the strange, almost masochistic, joy of reading challenging literature, of "a kind of penance" that one engages "in a state of grim distraction, like somebody going out to score hard drugs." Immersing oneself in the work of this humble, nearly anonymous man, dead now three decades, carries the same potent, slow kick—for those who dare.

From the *L Magazine*, February 2, 2011

Kevin Holden says

best.book.ever.

for.real.

cristiana says

i'm a little tongue-tied when it comes to reviewing zukofsky's work. it's revelatory, a small rebellion on the page. language and sound driven, dense and collaged, it'll leave an indelible impact for poets/writers - sort of fuck up the way you see/systematize a poem.

Carl says

the greatest year of my life was spent reading "A" from cover to cover. its one of the few poetry books i can quote without fail.

Fuchsia Rascal says

This is an amazing poem, and it's my goal to one day get through the whole thing (and understand it). So far, though, I've only done a deep analysis of "A-9". Which is amazing on its own.

Ruth says

I spent some years reading "A" aloud -- all of it, bit by bit, taking one part at a time (rather than interspersing the four voices in the last section, set to music). It is perhaps the most musically advanced work written for the American ear. Brilliant, inclusive, digressive, hermetic and expansive -- and at the same time -- Louis Zukofsky's work is beyond full comprehension, but each and every effort -- at sense, but more so for the upper limit -- music -- is exquisitely repaid more than one can imagine. In the "if I could only have one book" game, this would have to be among the very few to consider.

John Hyland says

Kind of ridiculous to say I've "read" this . . . (which isn't to say it's "unreadable," quite the contrary--more it's to say one is always (& in all ways) reading "A"). I first encounter Z's "A" as an undergraduate at Orono . . . & I throw it up here now for a couple of reasons: (1) I just spent last semester reading the (inevitably so-called) Objectivists with S.Cope here in Buffalo, and it was rather sad to learn that this crucial 20th century work is *out of print*--which leads to (2) I was delighted when my brother found a copy (that wasn't way too much money) in a used bookstore somewhere near Amherst, Mass.

Peter Landau says

"A" is an epic poem, over 800 pages, which Louis Zukofsky began in 1927. It wasn't published in its complete form until 1978, the same year he died. It's broken into 24 sections, opening with themes of horses and music, specially Bach, which are repeated throughout. The final section is a musical score by his wife with four voices, which takes up a quarter of the poem's length. Zukofsky said his poem should be read literally, and I took him up on it, though I had no choice. I could pick out autobiographical pieces on his wife and son, World War II through Vietnam, and other historical tidbits. He reaches backwards, too, to Homer and Spinoza, among others. But I can't really say what the poem is about, other than it's about a life, in all its dimensions. That's enough. The deeper I got into it, the less I got out of it, but that's just me. The signposts became more abstract. Maybe it had to do with my regiment of reading a book a week. It took Zukofsky a lifetime to write this, I probably need a similar span to digest it.
