

Re-Reading Louis Zukofsky's *Bottom: On Shakespeare*
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“Epic Criticism/ Critical Epics:
(Anti-) Metaphysics of Quotation in Zukofsky' *Bottom: On Shakespeare*”

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ULYSES. I do not strain at the position—
It is familiar, — but at the author's drift;
Who, in his circumstance, expressly proves
That no man is lord of anything,
(Though in and of him there is much consisting,)
Till he communicates his parts to others.

-Celia Zukofsky, *Pericles*

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Site/Sight/Cite: A Re-wording Experience

I have deliberately mis-attributed the epigraph; readers who are teleologically, in a word metaphysically, inclined will be pleased to find that I have done so purposefully; those who are not, will also be pleased, because the opposite of this mistake is what I will argue brings into being Zukofsky's anti-metaphysical stance in *Bottom*, a stance that would remain incomplete if he did not simultaneously seek to affirm a better-than-metaphysical one, an affirmation of great importance to us here. With these interpretive intents in mind, I can now put forth a series of three questions around my original mis-attribution, for which I intend to clear a small but I think important answering ground in this brief text. They read as follows: How can quotation work as a textual negotiation of what Harold Bloom famously calls the “Anxiety of

Influence?” How can a work of criticism be understood as an epic project and how an epic can be understood as a work of criticism in Bakhtinian literary epistemology? In what ways can and cannot Zukofsky’s, both Mr. and Ms., use of Shakespeare theatre be considered “Epic” as Benjamin sees the theatre of Brecht?

This essay, in the literal French sense of “attempt,” is not for the theoretically weak at heart; nor is it for the poetically weak at heart either: for Zukofsky in *Bottom*, as we will come to understand here, is all at once both theoretical and poetic; it is the multifaceted relationships, or perhaps *struggles* is a better word, between these two aspects of the work in question that we will attempt to grapple with. In this way, the following inquiry can and should be considered paradoxical: on the one hand, it deals with certain ideas in relation to the materialities that correspond to them (the theoretical or metaphysical approach), and on the other hand it deals with certain materialities in relation to the ideas that correspond to them (the poetic or anti-metaphysical approach). Zukofsky’s interpretive encounter with Shakespeare and host of other poets—in the broad and correct sense of the term—in *Bottom* is, I believe, what makes reading the book “slowly” (as opposed to “closely”), in Nietzschean terminology, such a rewarding experience; or, as Derrida might have put it had he been me writing this essay in English, a *re-wording experience*.

The original mis-attributed epigraph above will serve as a prototypical *site* to have a first re-wording experience: the epigraph is nothing less than a site in which dwells a mis-attributed re-wording (citation) of a re-wording (quotation) of a re-wording (translation), acts that always already imply a collective of interlocutors, or peers; quotation is thus always already a collective, and thus social, act; thus Zukofsky writes that “physical eyes may eventually close on it [a quotation]; in one’s own head it goes on as notes in other’s heads” (333). Secondly, it will serve as a prototypical *sight*,

which in the context of this text signifies the bio-phenomenological experience of *seeing* such a tripartite re-wording, for “if the reading cannot escape seeing, how can seeing escape the reading” (66); this is what Zukofsky calls a “literal hallucination” (25). Thirdly and lastly, it will serve as a prototypical *cite*, an instance of quotation, which by the very fact of being mis-attributed calls into question the function and effects of the chorus of *correctly* attributed quotes in *Bottom*, which we will look into in the following section of this essay. Our attempt to grapple with *Bottom* here is thus to be considered an inquiry into a situated re-wording experience, a theoretical poetics (oxy moron intended) of quotation, an experience that takes place in three different but intimately related ways: in site, in sight and in cite.

To pick up on one of Zukofsky’s perhaps innumerable puns (“Insight moves sight to the site, or the site moves sight to insight” (60)), I hope that this attempt will, if nothing else, propose some interestingly convincing in-sites, in-sights, and in-cites.

Quoting Fathers

Quotation is repetition with *differance*.

In order to come to an understanding of why this is Zukofsky’s argument regarding quotation in *Bottom*, and in order to simultaneously perform what may be called an instance of Zukofskian parallelogical (as opposed to the Poundian parataxical) methodology and show the import of what he has to say to what may amount to the most prominent discourse in modernism, that surrounding and substantiated by quotation, we will now consider *Bottom* in relation to an other important (post-)

modern/ist thinker: Harold Bloom¹. In so doing, I believe we will find that as Zukofsky sees it, quotation can be and actually is an act of homage and at the same time a subversive act.

Bloom argues that the “strong” poet is always already engaged in a “fight to the end” with both nature and previous poets. This engagement takes place in the act of simultaneously trying to replace nature with art, and previous art with his. This line of thinking becomes relevant to our discussion of quotation when Bloom begins to describe writers’ uses of their fathers as literary sources; understood in a the particular sense we are dealing with here, quotations are in effect a species of sources. In this way, quotation can, at least at first sight, be understood as what Bloom calls a “misprison,” or deliberate misunderstanding, of a strong poet’s actual sources.

Zukofsky, however, overcomes this misprisoning by accurately giving citations to his quotations, and hardly commenting on them, and thus not falling victim to the ambivalence of the Oedipal complex Bloom sees at work in all great literary texts; there is none of what Zukofsky calls “misplaced concreteness” in *Bottom* (164). The act of citation without commentary also helps situate Zukofsky’s (anti-) metaphysical position in *Bottom*; citing, especially in a poetic text, anchors utterances at the situated original moment of their production, abstaining from commenting solidifies this anchoring all the more; there is no floating signified or signifier here; it is thus perhaps also a strategy to overcome what was to be called the so-called “crisis of referentiality.” In this way Zukofsky brings Fiske’s Middle Ages into Modernity: “In the Middle Ages there was a generous tolerance of much of what we have since learned to stigmatize as plagiarism” (130). Thus, in faithfully repeating his literary father’s words, and at the same time producing an origin-al text, Zukofsky is doing what Bloom claims is the impossible:

¹ In a more extended analysis, I think it would be in-sightful to look at both Benjamin’s and Bakhtin’s

origin-ality through repetition, what Zukofsky himself calls the “strength of repetition” (191).

Where Zukofsky is even more innovative is that he seeks to draw parallels between each of these anchored quotations; he puts Bacon beside Shakespeare, and says: “look!” What we see when Zukofsky asks us to do this is the *differance*, both as the difference and differance of meaning, between each anchored quotation; as we come to realize this *differance*, we come to realize at what ratio the quotation is an act of homage or an act of subversion; perhaps an inverse ration of the book’s thesis, “love is to reason as the eyes are to the mind” (266). As Zukofsky, quoting Spinoza, writes, “The more an image [or quotation] is associated with other things, the more often it flourishes... the More causes there are by which it can be excited” (29).

The question then becomes: what happens when Celia quotes *the father*?

Without having read *any* of modern long poems, from Melville’s *Clarel* to Pound’s *Cantos*, Bakhtin opposes *epic* to *novel*, favouring the latter. Zukofsky, while it is unlikely he read Bakhtin, does poetic criticism, which, with an acute awareness of the status of the long poem in modernism that Zukofsky undoubtedly had, can be situated between what Bakhtin calls the discourses of epics and novels.

As Bakhtin sees them, epics turn a blind eye to the contemporary socio-historical moment, and a deaf ear to the surrounding currents of speech diversity. Janet

Giltrow probably gives the best summary of Bakhtinian literary epistemology in a forthcoming article:

Epic instates the dominating word of the fathers, imposing a sealed past on a living present. Foreclosing the future, the deed of the ancestor forfeits possibility to praise of antique glories, *faits accomplis*. Poetry (of the kind Bakhtin has in mind) isolates and indemnifies the individual voice as if self-sufficient and unimplicated in the unfolding voice of the other. Both epic and poetry refuse the *historicity* of the word – its service to the epoch, “the day, even ... the hour” (263)—and its *sociality* – its rendering of groups, schools, generations, professions, and their positions and interests. For Bakhtin, the stylistic profiles of epic and poetry also project a philosophy of language and in turn a politics: centralised conceptions, unitary and unshakeable ideas, and uniform speech respectability. Novelistic style, on the other hand, incites “dialogic” heteroglossia, and the infinite calibrations of positions vis-à-vis the other’s word. For Bakhtin, this is the zone of democratic possibility.²

My argument is almost self-evident, and can thus be stated hyper-concisely: by way of a Levi-Straussian bricolage of quotations from epic and poetic sources across continents, time zones and historical periods, as well as frequent heteroglossic in-cites from the contemporary discourses of industrialization, science, mathematics and biology, Zukofsky’s discourse in *Bottom* is at the same time epic, poetic and novelistic in Bakhtinian literary epistemology.

² Giltrow, Janet. “Democratic Intention and Dialogic Intelligence in *Cuckold*,” forthcoming, 2003.

Zukofsky epic criticism does to bourgeois readers of criticism what Benjamin saw Brecht's epic theatre doing to bourgeois theatregoers: it shocks them to consciousness and rouses them to action.

In order to explain, rather than substantiate why and how this proposition is true, I will focus on two instances of *Bottom*, well known to any of its "slow readers." The first instance is, as Bob Perelman points out in his provocative preface, the fact that Zukofsky sees Shakespeare's Works as One Work. Far from being merely hermeneutic move, this proposition is, moreover, both a shock to consciousness and a call to action, familiar to those who have seen any of Brecht's epic theatre, or have read Benjamin's essay of that title: it calls to *re-think* Shakespeare's texts as one text, and in so doing challenges us to call into question all previous Shakespeare criticism.

The second instance is a passage that appears late in the text, but which, once read, casts a invasive light onto all the text that surrounds it: "Plato's fault, and Shakespeare's, is that his drama chances the unwisdom of showing and writing too much for a careless reader's attention" (373). But Zukofsky, perhaps on purpose, commits exactly the same fault! For this reason, we can propose with assurance that Zukofsky reads these master dramatists, and makes use of their "fault," in order to make sure that they—all three of them— have only their reader *careful* attention; yet another shock to consciousness and call to action.

In order to substantiate, rather than explain, why and how this proposition is true in Zukofsky's criticism of Shakespeare, Benjamin's criticism of Brecht, and our meta-criticism of all four writer, I will tell my readers that if they do not seek and find an answer as to why and how the preceding proposition is true for themselves, then they will never truly understand the innermost and outermost workings of Zukofsky's *Bottom: On Shakespeare*.

Works Cited

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