

Re-Reading Louis Zukofsky's *Bottom: On Shakespeare*
A Symposium for Students, Poets, and Scholars
October 31 & November 1st 2003
University at Buffalo

NO IDEAS BUT EYED EARS

Gregg Biglieri

CITE [MF *citer* to cite, summon, fr. L *citare* to put in motion, rouse, summon, fr. freq. of *ciere* to stir, move — more at –KINESIS] 1: to call upon officially or authoritatively to appear (as before a court) 2: to quote by way of example, authority, or **proof** 4: to bring forward or call to another's attention esp. as an example, **proof**, or precedent. I'm thinking of Z's reiterative citation of ocular proof—"and what the eyes mind are proofs" (*Bottom* 325)—the eyes themselves are *proofs*—those same *double o's* as contained in the moon as it looks—when they see the *eyes* in another's text. This citational practice is a way of calling our attention not to the import or connotation of a symbolic language, but to the literal recurrence of words and letters; the words themselves are first sighted and then cited, seen and re-seen, read and then reread. In any event we remain at the level of the eyes, the level of sense-certainty and sense experience, those moments of startling intuition, moments of *recognition* when we see ourselves in another's words. This relates to the Longinian sublime which describes the experience of *being moved by* the orator's words ("our soul takes proud flight" on the wings of another's words). In the case of citation, the one who cites is the one who has first sighted (hunted up) the words he wishes to net from among a nest of another's words. To "take proud flight" and yet also to flee from; to take flight out of fear of identification [fugue, Lat. *fuga* flight]—the hunter and the hunted become one, become one's identity. But the words themselves are no one's possession; there are no claims to ownership especially at the level of the letter and the literal, and of the senses at the level of sense experience. One can't claim ownership of the alphabet; one can't claim that because one *sees*, no one else can *see* without properly citing the initial seer's *sight*. The reader's eyes seem to see through the writer's eyes ("we see with his eyes") and the writer's eyes look back at the reader's eyes. The experience of sublime quotation would be the sense in which the one who cites feels as if he himself had written ("produced") what he has read ("heard").

The picture comes back through the letters—comes to life, returns to life—'liveforever': "The physical vision that Shakespeare suggests, long after the syllabaries, often effuses like an old pictograph thru the syllabary or word it has become. **Looking back** to see itself with its acquired sound, it must 'see' with a **motion forward** to a circuitous self-answer of an apocryphal soothsaying" (*Bottom* 36). From cave painting to atomic physics the circuitous patterning remains the same: "1960 / If the process is

irreversible there is still a question: could science have **looked forward** to so much impact inside the head without **feeding itself backward** on sculptural *bodies*, tho they be cyclotrons, atomic piles—unintentionally they must hold the eye? Perhaps the sensuous embedded tonnage delights the technician as he looks to the point of making him forget the sublimed and subliminal cloudlike ends they are meant for” (*Bottom* 346).

“LIKE SHAKESPEARE’S M, THIS H” (33)

Bottom is a story of letters, as letters plot the points on a “graph of culture,” which uses the Alphabet as a structuring device. Z wants to get back to the garden, to Voltaire’s dictum to cultivate your garden, by getting back to letters as real, actual, living things—the leaves of a tree “whose leaves are languaged’ (192)—leaving letters back at the post office of nature. All things including writing are *natural*; a creation ‘out of itself alone’ as an instant variation out of all creation. This is the nature of quotation and of nature as quotation: replicating cells, letters, genealogies, fathers and sons—or the “I” and “SON” as in the dialogue format of “Definitions.” So we must proceed one step further than the X-ray; not just the *view* or *perspective* from a black-and-white photograph which itself is a kind of writing on film (where shades are syllables and letters glow in the dark) because then one would *end* with letters, whereas Z would have us follow (read) the letters as they lead us back to life, nature, and the garden unerringly. The letters don’t gel and stiffen as if in some polymer; they *see* through, back to the “seen and green,” the fresh shoots and offshoots, reeds (reading). The pages are leaves we leaf through, the literal leaves of the book which is a tree from whence paper derives the pulp of its message—James Russell Lowell: ‘the living tongue resembled that tree which father Huc saw in Tartary, whose leaves were languaged—and every hidden root of thought, every subtilest fibre of feeling, was mated by new shoots and leafage of expression. . .’ (*Bottom* 192). NATURE = TEXT. Shakespeare’s text steals from Shakespeare’s text. Organon of Tautology. So, follow through on the substitution of Aristotle: The text herself discovers her appropriate measure. *Seen* and *green*. They see through themselves, through X-[A-Z]-ray eyes back to ‘simple’ eyes, the naked eye in the garden, seeing through the X-ray [“tho Hamlet’s discourse with *th’incorporal air* (Quarto 2) prefigures a type of X-rays” (*Bottom* 441)] into an original landscape, a garden of eyes. Now the image of a camera obscura is reversed through the lens of ideology back to the thing itself—the nature of nature. But in order to accomplish this transformation, the words must conjure their own voices (throw their voices, ventriloquize) back through our own reading eyes and ears (across time and across generations), through our eyes not succumbing to errors, through our ears attentive to the music, to *Musicks Letters*. The idea is the EYED EAR. Z’s scholarly work is a conjuring act, a conjecture—he brings words back to life by rearranging, rescoring, reinscribing and repeating (recurrences) as Pablo Casals rings new changes on the tunes and, in turn, is

‘translat’d’ by the retuning, forked by the tuning fork (diapason), by their notes and ultimately their alphabets—the story of letters.

“Conceivably—musical notes set so they would **tag** the insistent plays on *see* thruout the entire play of Shakespeare’s text might, along with other notes voicing all the other words of his text, show up variational recurrences of sense more precisely than italics. . . . A music sounding Shakespeare’s separate letters and language for their insistence would more readily show what virtue or sense is *preferd* as against the unavoidable blinding and blendings of sense of the *preserv’d* or destroyed humanity that fills his plots. . . . And if, as the musical analysis might emotionally prove in tagging all the warning offshoots of *to see*, this is what Shakespeare’s text is saying over and over as *its* thought, its art hanging on some thing like the tree of all men’s story, where all art thrives, is plain: the crest green with the sap of a deciduous culture, the sap running down thru the trunk timed to sightless words.” (*Bottom* 38)

The organicism is not romantic but naturally tautological, or more accurately, ‘simply’ literal. The words and letters themselves are allegories. This sap runs down tree trunks like tears, losing lifeblood in the progress of culture away from the garden of the naked eye toward “sightless words.” This is S’s warning according to Z. The alphabet is not a tourniquet, but a bouquet. If writing is the flower absent from all bouquets (Mallarme), Z would at least provide us with the hope that through such colossal acts of reading as evidenced in *Bottom*, we may come to see the green again in words and letters, sip their sap and see anew; that reading might place new buds upon the twigs and stems of writing, that we might cultivate our own gardens.

This is the crux of the reader and writer nexus: Who can tell the reader from the writer? The writing itself as a collection of literal letters belongs to no separate identity, is no one person’s possession; if we are possessed, moved, or stirred by another’s words, who’s to say if its the author’s intention or the intuitive reflex of recognition immanent to the words and to the literal letters and syllables themselves? “Two distincts, division,” returns us to the primacy of paradox in what Z calls the finest example of Metaphysical poetry. And like all good paradoxes it goes both ways, aims in two directions or senses at once: “**The instant certainty of words is all that exists for one to become two**” (*Prep* 27). Words move back and forth between reader and writer because language is transitive if not proto-dyslexic; this is the speech act, the written act, or transaction between the two parties which both separates and brings them together. A recurrent movement passing from one to another—re: current—transmission from person to person as a medium of exchange. We need to see that for Z the letters themselves are the world, or “everything that is the case:” “if I know English in the world, *dog* can sometimes be read backwards, and **reading the letters forwards and backwards is the world**” (*Bottom* 55). After setting up a dichotomy between theses two questions —“what is purpose without sense” and “what is sense without purpose?” — Z returns to his back and forth trajectory, which always crisscrosses questions of

infinity and the infinite extension of the writers' lines of text, rather than implying a sealed circularity: "Speaking either way, backwards or forwards, or from without inwards, like Aristotle: Insight moves sight to the site, or the site moves sight to insight. Each makes *natural* sense: i.e., a purposeful thought; a thought felt as purposeful. [Note that when Z states in "A" that "thinking's the lowest rung," he adds, "no one will believe I feel this," stressing the word *feel* as opposed to *think*. So that we might legitimately posit that everyone *will* believe that he does *think* this]. But the term *site* must always be there with the other two—sight and insight—or they will not be there" (*Bottom* 60). My point here is to propose that the crypt word in this punning weave is "*cite*." And if "**reading the letters forwards and backwards is the world**," then "the term [cite] must always be there." "All minds quote" (Emerson), so my insight here is that love at first cite is always already love at second cite. As if the writer's first act were an incitement to revision—is it not?

To continue this notion of sublime citation as a movement that stirs or puts into motion (similar to Blake's "to rouse the faculties to act"), we should follow this back and forth movement (this weaving, this fugal form) to Z's Frankenstein of film: "But if an artist's power of action is not to be destroyed by conceiving himself after a nature not his own his only fear is the unnecessary. The charm or trick of running film forward and backwards which made it possible to blow up a whole body in a French film early in the 1900's and miraculously put that body together again has never yet worked with the artist's nature" (*Bottom* 426). If autopsy means, literally, the act of seeing with one's own eyes, then Z's practice needs to be turned on its head, so to speak, so that readers can come to see it as autopsy-turvy: "in Bottom the proper subordination of sense to intellect is over-thrown in a topsy-turvy metamorphosis that puts his 'bottom' faculties on 'top'" (Gilman, *The Curious Perspective* 46). In the OED, one of the phrases cited under "bottom" is "to stand on one's own bottom," which means to act for oneself. To see for oneself. In order to "look up" words you must not look up, but down and onto the page and follow the lines along the plane of the text. Z's citations reverse the proportion between one's own writing and one's quotations and in so doing he exposes the inherent, unspeakable secret of most critical practice which is glorified citation and at worst mere replication of bibliography. That is, the nature of quotation as Z practices it is qualitatively different in the sense that he lives through, feeds on and digests the words, whereas the scholarly practice of the pedant is one which never truly absorbs, nor lives with and through these lines and thus maintains an apparently objective distance, keeping the words at arm's length and never allowing them to truly affect, inhabit, move and redirect him. Z's practice consists of strewing fragmentary, elliptical quotations: shards, words, syllables, letters, and snippets. Each of these scattered parts is part of the whole and part of the same substance (Spinoza). In Neil Hertz's reading of Longinus, his attention to how Longinus' argument works could be profitably used to re-envision Z's practice in *Bottom*: "the movement I follow is clearly not linear; it does not run in tandem with the progress of the rhetorical argument from topic to topic but is in certain ways

cumulative—that is, at certain points one becomes aware of a thickening of texture. There are pages where, challenged by an aspect of his theme or by the strength of a quotation, Longinus seems to be working harder at locating his discourse close in to the energies of his authors. At those moments, he too is drawn into the sublime turning, and what he is moved to produce is not merely an analysis illustrative of the sublime but further figures for it' (Hertz 8). Later in his text Hertz compares Longinus' practice to that of Walter Benjamin, relating *hupsos* to *aura*: "Each evokes a catastrophe, yet each seems equally concerned with a recurrent phenomenon in literature, the movement of disintegration and figurative reconstitution I have been calling the sublime turn" (Hertz 14). This sense of disintegration corresponds to the first moment of ingesting another's words through the process of quotation, which is an active, if not violent act akin to Samuel Johnson's comment "that the great part of the labor of every writer is only the destruction of those who went before him" (cited in *Bottom* 195). The second part, or the process of figurative reconstitution, would correspond to the fully digested product that is reassembled, literally recontextualized and re-sited in the work of *Bottom*. Those "pearls" of quotation that are strewn before our eyes need to be seen as pearls literally, so that we as readers don't end up dubbing ourselves "swine." These "pearls" were literally the precursor's "eyes," and by quoting them Z makes the words see again and makes us see the words anew without the intervening mediation of Critical Assumptions which would blind us to the literal fact of eyes. Hertz continues, "[t]his movement is not unrelated to their own method of writing, which consists in more or less violent fragmentation of literary bodies [Frankenstein] into 'quotations,' in the interest of building up a discourse of one's own, a discourse which, in its turn, directs attention to passages that come to serve as emblems of the critic's most acute, least nostalgic sense of what he is about. 'Quotations in my works,' Benjamin wrote, 'are like robbers by the roadside who make an armed attack and relieve an idler of his convictions'" (Hertz 14-15). Lest we think that Z was unaware of the risks of his own practice of citation, we should heed the hint of self-criticism evident in this passage from Samuel Johnson's *Preface to Shakespeare*: ". . . his . . . power . . . not in the splendor of particular passages, but by the progress of his fable . . . he that tries to recommend him by select quotations, will succeed like the pedant in *Hierocles*, who when he offered his house to sale, carried a brick in his pocket as specimen" (*Bottom* 195 ellipses in text).

The idea is not to order, nor to "tie his points," to tie the points of his "graph of culture," [note "graph" bringing the written quality to the fore], not to make a Baroque necklace of irregular "pearls that were his eyes," but to let the music of the words speak in startling juxtaposition: between 'simple' and 'compounded'; the tension between eyes and ears; between all polar extremes of scale; basso and treble; upper limit music, lower limit speech; intercalary synesthesia. A negative synesthesia, but nonetheless one which keeps us grounded in our senses, in our own sense and senses without transcendental (44-5) invisibilities taking over from the work of scientific rarefaction (of A-bomb and "predatory intent"), or

physicists who require instruments to see things that cannot be seen by the naked eye as opposed to the tangible, substantial (423), solid object (323), eye and ear, melody and sight (424): “Art exists in agitation and activity where no human sense is cut off from another and netted in whatever ethics such an organism as Spinoza can produce, or be increased or diminished by, ‘in so far as it is understood by his nature’” (423-4). I’m keying on “agitation” here, noting that sense of movement and action and recalling that vibratory shudder, that tremor that marks the Kantian sublime—the sublime is that which *moves* us; takes us from here to there, site to site, cite to cite: “For while taste for the beautiful presupposes and sustains the mind in *restful* contemplation, the feeling of the sublime carries with it, as its character, a mental *agitation* connected with our judging of the object. But (since we like the sublime) this agitation is to be judged subjectively purposive, and so the imagination will refer this agitation either to the *cognitive power* or to the *power of desire*” (*Critique of Judgment* #24 101). “In presenting the sublime in nature the mind feels agitated, while in aesthetic judgment about the beautiful in nature it is in restful contemplation. This agitation (above all at its inception) can be compared with a vibration, i.e., with a rapid alternation of repulsion from, and attraction to, one and the same object” (*Critique of Judgment* #27 115). One of the tensions of Z’s poetics is this split between an aesthetics of the beautiful and an aesthetics of the sublime (we might substitute “poetics” for “aesthetics” here). This tension can be mapped onto his concepts of ‘sincerity’ and ‘objectification’: sincerity’s subjectively infinite sense of particulars would correspond to the mathematical sublime, while objectification’s sense of “rested totality” would correspond to an aesthetics of the beautiful: “properly no verse should be called a poem if it does not convey the totality of perfect rest” (*Prep* 14). The split between the quick and the dead. In Z’s oft cited “definition” of sincerity there lies a cryptic which underscores rather than resolves this tension: “Writing occurs which is the detail, not mirage of seeing, of thinking with things as they exist, and of directing them along a line of melody. Shapes suggest themselves, and the mind senses and receives awareness” (*Prep* 13). Most commentators fix on “the detail, not mirage, of seeing” and hence misread (and certainly “mishear”) the movement of this definition. For the sentence begins, “Writing occurs.” We are already in the domain of reading and writing and not in some pure state of ‘simply’ seeing ‘natural’ objects. This apparent privileging of opticality is more correctly viewed as a visuality which permits the sense of one’s being imprinted by the words one sees—pressed and impressed by the print itself. Instead, we should stress the sequence and extension of the “of” clauses: *of* seeing, *of* thinking, *of* directing. Seeing constitutes only one third of this equation and certainly not the totality of these perceptions. What is being repressed is *writing*: for Z, seeing is reading and reading is writing.

Z AND NEGATIVE SYNESTHESIA

Z's argument is that the senses are discrete and thus one experiences his poetics as analytic rather than as synthetic, as particular, crypto-Cartesian, 'clear and distinct.' Z focuses on the certainty available to the senses and to the eyes rather than to a mind which inclines toward making sense of the senses and arranging them into an air pocket of knowledge. So the mind is trumped by a discordance of the senses, a disjunction which calls our attention to the interval between the senses as the place to stress; or their discordance leads to a mind and intellect attempting to resolve the discord into a concord. In either case, this is not synesthesia per se: Bottom's dream, "the eye hath NOT heard," "the ear hath NOT seen."

SYNESTHESIA: 1. A condition in which one type of stimulation evokes the sensation of another, as when the hearing of a sound produce the visualization of a color. 2. A sensation felt in one part of the body as a result of a stimulus applied to another, as in referred pain. 3. The description of one kind of sense impression by using words that normally describe another.

This idea of synesthesia is more apt to McLuhan's sense of "haptic harmony," rather than Z's privileging of the eye: "The Lockean swoon was the hypnotic trance induced by stepping up the visual component of experience until it filled the field of attention. Psychologists define hypnosis as the filling of the field of attention by one sense only. At such a moment, 'the garden' dies. That is, the garden indicates the interplay of all the senses in haptic harmony" (*The Gutenberg Galaxy* 17). Perhaps, returning to that sense of motion and movement, we could more accurately read Z's "sense" as "kinesthetic."

KINEMATICS [F *cinematique*, fr. Gk *kinema*, motion, fr. *kinein* to move]. Cinema.

KINESTHESIA [NL, fr. Gk *kinein* + *aisthesis* perception]: a sense mediated by end organs located in muscles, tendons and **joints** and stimulated by bodily movements and tensions; also: sensory experience derived from this sense.

"Poring over the words of such English writing as Shakespeare's or Wyatt's, conjecture may posit that their craft is primarily an attempt to English the truncated thought of their known world—for what else, as histories reiterate, is the thought of the late Renaissance, but an avidity in great part for the thought of an older and mythically unmaimed world. Conjecture will thus say that **the craft of their writing is this thought that penetrates the smallest joints of their words**, those irrational numbers keeping the 'greater, deeper' concepts together." (*Bottom* 27-8)

The *tension* involved in the word *kinesthesia*—the sense of motion, movement, and stirring all in equal tension—conflicts with the other side of Z’s poetics which desires the “perfect rest” of objectification. In relation to the senses trumping intellect, it’s almost as if Z wants us to respond to his argument by reflex action, by kinesthetics. As if to trump the optic nerve which would translate the image inverted on the retina and change upside down to right side up. As if we could bypass the mind and erring brain by a reflexive clarity of eyes, eyes-to-eyes, writer’s eyes to reader’s eyes reading with the writer’s eyes. As if our eyes would respond like knees to the doctor’s rubber hammer and we could break the circuit which redirects this action to the conduit of mind —directly from eye to eye in perfect clarity along the line of light, short-circuiting a negative notion of gaze. But lest my own sense of things seem to have strayed beyond the context and contours of Z’s practice, and also to return to Nick’s original citation of Christopher Smart, perhaps we can re-see the reflex action of eyes in a new and naked delight: “For my talent is to give an impression / upon words by punching, that when the reader / casts his eye upon ‘em, he take up the image / from the mould which I have made” (cited in *Bottom* 197).