

Re-Reading Louis Zukofsky's *Bottom: On Shakespeare*
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Michael Cross

“For want of the image of a voice”

We have lost many senses.

—Henry Adams

Love is the mind's desire and the eye's achievement.

—David Melnick

Trees have been stripped to the root by a seer on her path across circumference of intellection. This is a tragic poem.

—Susan Howe

In the fifth installment of Matthew Barney's film cycle *Cremaster*, the Queen of Chain and her lover, an incarnation of Harry Houdini, are separated by what at first is a series of temporal flashbacks. The separation becomes physical within the confines of the Hungarian State Opera House, where the majority of the film's action takes place. Whereas Pyramus and Thisby, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, are horizontally divided, the lovers in *Cremaster 5* are separated vertically—the Queen overlooks the symphony and stage from the Royal Booth, as Barney, playing the Giant, stands waist deep in the Gellért Thermal Baths a floor below. She is the sole viewer/vocalist in an opera featuring an alter ego of Barney (the Diva) who climbs around the “fourth wall” of the stage by vine, melting into a messy, viscous substance as he arrives stage left. A gaping orifice rests beneath the Queen, opening upon the thermal baths below. The hole, in classic Barney-esque fashion, appears to be a human orifice, a sort of outrageously amplified and synthetic anus, shimmering in the light of the opera house with a slimy film. From this vantage, the Queen watches Barney, waist-deep in

the baths, as Füd_r sprites swim around his grotesquely abridged genitals, absconded by floating pearls.

Barney and his queen's predicament is similar to Pyramus and Thisby's, a predicament singularly important to my reading of Louis Zukofsky and his *Bottom: On Shakespeare*¹. Both dramas feature a disruption of the "natural" world by the synthetic, and in both, sense-impression undergoes the sort of synesthesia so important to Zukofsky and Bottom. When Bottom awakens from his dream he notes, 'the eye of man hath not heard, the ear of man hath not seen, man's hand is not able to taste, his tongue to conceive, nor his heart to report, what my dream was" (M.N.D. IV, i). As Pyramus, Bottom re-enacts this synesthesia and its pleasures: "I see a voice! Now will I to the chink, To spy and I can hear my Thisby's face" (M.N.D. V, i). Only when Thisby attempts to kiss Pyramus through the wall's chink (Snout's physical hand cupped to make a hole) does the terror of their situation become evident. Thisby says, "I kiss the wall's hole, not your lips at all" (M.N.D. V, i). The terror of this misidentification permeates the *Cremaster Cycle*, creating a sort of artificial sensuousness, a frustration of desire and sense-impression, a wall constructed manually that exhibits the "radiant heat" of a live thing. Zukofsky writes of Thisby's horror, "These words edge pleasure, innocence and terror. They canter towards a thoughtful (sic²), sensuous, and pre-archaic wall all at once; like Disney cartoons that may amuse children their animation is not childlike" (Bottom 34). And like Disney, there is a childish sensation in Barney's films verging on the "primitive," undercut by a terror ubiquitous as "gas."

¹ Mind you, there are many similar occurrences in *Cremaster*. See, for instance, *Cremaster 4* in which Barney, playing the Loughton Candidate, tap-dances around a gaping hole which leads to a claustrophobic world of underground tunnels filled with the same viscous liquid, suggesting simultaneously an orphic voyage and Bottom's "bottomless dream."

For Zukofsky, the “primitive,” the “natural, elemental,” is a return to sense-impression, namely “a single and simple pleasure like sight” (67)². He writes,

...sight is a function of (numerically) irrational biological power of the human animal, which begins as body, finds a voice that involves or generates intellect, which recalls a type head atop the most primitive human animal...(67)

And further,

...in primitive time man looks around and into himself—his body and his cave to be decorated—then looks out and wonders how he first looked around and into himself; having reached fabling time he looks out by these means, above, underneath earth, *its heard life that once made him speak now rarifying his picturing sounds of earth into song* like those of an Odyssey; in late time he conceives past a vanishing point, nowhere and everywhere projecting ‘objects’ in signs and indices which may again let him look around, into, out, up, down for an underpinning of earth... (Bottom 87, italics mine)

This talk of the cave echoes the primitive of Snout’s piecemeal costume. Zukofsky writes, “the Physical vision that Shakespeare suggests...often effuses like an old pictograph” (36), implying the primitive of cave art. And as the primitive is “a typically rough or simple home accessory made by hand,” Snout’s wall is equally ingenuous:

Wall. In this same interlude it doth befall
That I, one Snout by name, present a wall:
And such a wall, as I would have you think,
That had in it a crannied hole or chink,
Through which the lovers, Pyramus and Thisby,
Did whisper often secretly
This loam, this rough-cast and this stone doth show
That I am that same wall: the truth is so:
And this the cranny is, *right and sinister*,
Through which the fearful lovers are to whisper
(M.N.D., V, i, italics mine).

The audience (through the glass of the fictive fourth wall) is directed to “see” Snout as Wall, even while their senses tell them otherwise: Demetrius says to Theseus, “It is the wittiest partition that ever I heard discourse, my lord” (M.N.D., V, i). Zukofsky calls this wall an “old solidity”—at the core of its material essence is a living being (as Barney’s walls pulsate

² For further discussion of the simple versus the compound, see part two of *Bottom*, especially Zukofsky’s use

with the warmth and wetness of living matter) covered in “plaster, or some loam, or some rough-cast” (note Demetrius’ language, suggesting Wall is a product of “wit”).

Zukofsky draws a distinction between the plaster and loam of Snout’s wall, and that of the “glass wall of the modern architect.” This partition of glass, “produced” in the modern world via intellect, is what Zukofsky dubs the *new primitive*, a product that “looks out of a similar wound on the few trees of the suburbs; he will not hunt in the woods again because a clock hand may be turned back but willfully” (Bottom 33). This modern wall is a “solid transparency,” making it possible to look back over the destruction of the natural world as one takes part in its annihilation. It appears innocent in the tortured landscape of the natural as it cannot be “seen”—its invisibility is a symptom of progress. The wall is the product of the hearth, and the hearth, in order to be stoked, is fed organic fuel. Zukofsky reminds us that “hearth” is part of the Greek root for “scar,” and to return to Scarus and his ‘T’ made into an ‘H,’ he claims that scar is analogous to both glass wall and text—the scar too can be pierced by vision (“Scarus had a wound...The glass wall of modern architecture looks out of a similar wound... (33)), and it can be read (Zukofsky in “Z (*signature*)”): “Sounding ‘That can doe hurt’—*doe*, the animal; as against *do*, the abstract scar. These eyeing intimacies of print are all actions...” (442)). Scarus answers Antony thus: “I have yet room for six scothes more” (A & C, IV, vii) as does the open field of the text and its landscape. Of this scar, both textual and tangible, Zukofsky writes, “all invention headed off by thought in late cultures has this wound” (Bottom 33).

Better, the *new primitive*: “a late thought retrospective with or anticipating an earliest freshness. In stance, so that the eye both savage and civilized when it looks thru glass wall and present abstract implications of *solid state* only the instruments of recent physics that are

not eyes may study” (34). The *new primitive* confuses the senses with its reliance on physics and invention. The eyes alone cannot “see”—they rely solely on instruments to measure the veracity of their subject (the measurements of technology control what and how we see/know). Here is the meeting point of the organic and synthetic: one can see, but only through the lens of science, and as such, sense becomes artificial/contingent. The glass wall is a product of the environment, but disallows the sensation of being part of the same; it is autonomous, but concedes a contingent perspective. Ironically, because the wall is synthetic (as are Barney’s gelatinous barriers), it facilitates the synesthesia that Bottom wishes to convey. And if the wall is opaque, the chink / pictograph allows one to see (often via sound) no matter how contingent upon the wall’s obstruction³: Peter Quince proclaims in his prologue, “Wall, that vile Wall which did these lovers sunder; / And through the Wall’s chink, poor souls, they are content to whisper” (M.N.D. V, i).

In order to illustrate the properties of the chink (and its capacity to produce synesthesia), Zukofsky describes a soothsayer capable of predicting the future using the primitive means of magic and intuition. He writes, “—a soothsayer—whose physical vision is no doubt lately primitive, *new* as modern *musique concrète*” (Bottom 36). That is, *new* in that the natural world is made manifest by the instruments of technology: the music is composed of the sounds of nature, captured (controlled/manipulated) via manufactured tools. Shakespeare’s physical vision, Zukofsky claims, “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” (36). Soothsaying is the simultaneity of looking forward and backward in order to produce “an image of the voice.” Ultimately, the destruction of the American landscape (in the name of

³ Perhaps a more contemporary example can be found in the voyeur-esque orifice of the shower wall in *Porkey*’s.

progress) is a similarly circuitous process⁴—an innocence like Acteon’s as he becomes the very thing he has been hunting, damned by his own design. Shakespeare, in his 59th sonnet writes, “O, that record could with a backward look” (Shakespeare 13).

In order to illustrate the melding of sight with sound, Zukofsky uses the language of chemistry. He claims, “there are three states in existence: one is solid, another is liquid, and the other is gas...It’s the same with the materials of poetry, you make images—that’s pretty solid—music, it’s liquid; ultimately if something vaporizes, that’s the intellect” (Prepositions 169). He continues, “I’d like to keep solid because I can’t help myself...,” but on the other hand, “it’s when the senses vaporize and, the head floats, but sometimes it floats beautifully. All these gases are very nice if you know what you are talking about” (171). The poet ought to employ a lower limit intellect, at least hierarchically lower than solid (sight) and liquid (sound). And as described above, it is difficult to separate one from the other in Zukofsky or Shakespeare. Both retain a backward glance as the “voice finds its image.” Zukofsky uses Chapman’s “the unspeakable good liquor there” as an example of a line that perfectly fuses image and cadence: the pictograph of the image comes out of the sound. Zukofsky restates his claims in these terms: “I said solid state, liquid, gas; as a matter of fact you can word it sense, essence, non-sense” (242). Epistemology is non-sense (“God knows, when I was done doing away with epistemology in *Bottom...*” (242)), too far gone from the human body and its impressions to make “sense.” In fact, the body for Zukofsky, and how it “knows” phenomena, is far superior to the intellect. He writes, “I like to keep the noises as close to the body as possible, so that (I don’t know how you’d express it mathematically) the eye is a function of the ear and the ear the eye; maybe with that you might feel a sense of smell, of taste even” (231).

⁴ See Henry Adams’ *The Tendency of History*, especially the third chapter of that volume, “The Rule of Phase

The text is cut off by artificiality as “all invention headed off by thought in late cultures has this wound.” The natural (sight and sound) can pierce through the “tensile strength” of the wall (intellect/progress/invention), only if the senses are capable of “seeing” its breaking point. “Wall,” played by Snout, is not a wall at all, only loam and plaster—manual “things.” Beneath the cover of what makes one “see” wall, is the essence of wall, a vibrant being diffusing radiant heat. And in *Cremaster*, the sensation of “solid state” is undercut by the viscosity of the material of construction: wall is synthetic, and thus can be pierced by sense. The chink, or the scar of the wall, allows the viewer to pierce the artificiality of the construction, yet, because of its limited scope, forces the viewer into a state of synesthesia, in which sight and sound become indistinguishable. This, in effect, creates the image of the voice.

Lawrence Weschler recounts an analogue in his *Mr. Wilson's Cabinet of Wonder*. In 1952, chiroptologist Donald R. Griffith, led an expedition to capture and study an elusive breed of bat called *Myotis lucifugus*. For two months, though this specific breed had been documented by researchers in the past, Griffith and his team were unable to capture a specimen, regardless of the many advanced snares they had developed. Welsher writes, “(So) Griffith devised a brilliant snaring device, consisting of five solid-lead walls, each one eight inches thick, twenty feet high, and two hundred feet long—all of them arrayed in a radial pattern, like spokes of a giant wheel, along the forest floor. The team affixed seismic sensors all along the walls in an intricate grid-like pattern, and proceeded to wait” (Welsher 9). It seems the bats “had developed a highly specialized form of echolocation based upon ultraviolet wavelengths, which even, in some instances, verged into the neighboring X-ray band of the wave spectrum” (8). The bats were impossible to catch, as they employed these

Applied to History,” for a generative distinction between history as a cycle and history as a “phase.”

ultraviolet rays to fly through solid substances. Griffith was finally able to catch a specimen of the genus when the “sensors recorded a pock. The number-three wall had received an impact of magnitude 10×3 ergs twelve feet above the forest floor and 193 feet out from the center of the wheel. The team members carted an X-ray viewing device out to the indicated spot, and sure enough, at a depth of $7 \frac{1}{8}$ inches, they located the first *Myotis lucifugus* ever contained by man, ‘eternally frozen in a mass of solid lead’” (9). The bat was able, finally, to pierce the wall with echolocation—a form of sound-seeing. The natural technology of the body, on a primitive level, revealing the tensile strength of the wall through synesthesia.

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