

Re-Reading Louis Zukofsky's *Bottom: On Shakespeare*  
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BOTTOMING ZUKOFSKY

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Many thanks to the dictionary, which, in at least one of its incarnations, reveals meanings of the word *bottom* available to Zukofsky in the “U.S., mid 1900s”:

**bottom** 1. the buttocks. [British and U.S. colloquial euphemism since the 1700s] ...

**bottoms** a nickname for a catamite. For synonyms see BRONCO. [U.S. slang, mid 1900s-pres.]<sup>1</sup>

Surely Zukofsky, a great lover of all things paronomastic and homophonic, knew the usages he risked when he entitled his book on Shakespeare *Bottom*. Following his claim in the *Autobiography* that “the work says all there needs to be said of one’s life,”<sup>2</sup> I want in turn to risk the assertion, in the absence of biographical proof or even psycho-biographical speculation, that bottoms play some role in Zukofsky’s conception of love in *Bottom*, though less obviously than the eyes that recur so insistently. For bottoms recur with an equally palpable insistence—at least to the reader who answers the book’s call to *see* what she reads, and at least in two ways: (1) Puns on bottoms appear and sully the philosophical language of the text, as if Zukofsky wanted to make his lavishly quoted sources (and “his own” words) say what “the philosopher blessed with a body might say,” or, more particularly, what the philosopher blessed with a bottom might say.<sup>3</sup> Thus, actors on the stage are “incontinent” (66), spontaneity is “posterior” to

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<sup>1</sup> Richard A. Spears, *Slang and Euphemism: A dictionary of oaths, curses, insults, sexual slang and metaphor, racial slurs, drug talk, homosexual lingo, and related matters* (New York: Jonathan David Publishers, 1981), 44.

<sup>2</sup> Louis Zukofsky, *Autobiography* (New York: Grossman Publishers, 1970).

<sup>3</sup> Zukofsky, *Bottom: On Shakespeare, Volume One* (Austin, TX: The Ark Press, 1963), 297.

nature and intelligence (82), Bacon explains Americans' lack of contributions to "posterity" (159), art that is "unretentive" is deemed wanting (182), one must see with one's own eyes in order to "assent" (208), metaphysics' "assurance" is only I, not Eye (215), "a good coate with rich trappings gets a *gay asse*, entraunce in at a great Gate" (330), and "the mind should see bottom" (392)—all of which makes me want to ask, with Zukofsky, of Lucretius: if the human is "the proper...species to which accidents happen" (118), do those accidents include the ones that even the best potty training cannot always prevent?<sup>4</sup> In almost any other text, I would call these puns themselves *accidental*, or at any rate viral, but here the infection seems to be invited, if not courted. (2) Many passages that are ostensibly quoted for their references to seeing eyes also happen to mention bottoms: Gaudier Brzeska on what he sees in statuary—and simultaneously on "solid excrements" and "whistling gases" (178); Chekhov's characters speaking in the same breath of looking and "buttocks" (219); Aristophanes' recognition that you can scratch both your eyes and your arse (372); and a confusion (or coincidence) in *Love's Labour's Lost* of "backs" and "eyes," in relation to the narrative context of which Zukofsky cannot help punning that "the end is in sight" (281-82). While there is no reason, in relation to the analogy *love: reason :: eyes: mind* and with so many passages on eyes at his disposal, that Zukofsky *had* to invoke bottoms alongside eyes, there *may* nevertheless be a reason that he often does. In other words, I may be able to demonstrate more or less convincingly that *Bottom* is obsessed with bottoms, but (like, Zukofsky, I cannot resist the pun) if so, to what *end*?

I do not want to suggest that buttocks are as important to Zukofsky as eyes, but at the same time I do not think that this accretion of bums in *Bottom* is a simple case of "ass for ass's sake." Rather, I would claim that all these bottoms serve as signposts, if

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<sup>4</sup> Emphases added.

you will, pointing to another, less dispensable meaning of bottom (cf. the catamites of the second dictionary entry): the submissive partner in an erotic encounter. In order to appreciate the nuances of Zukofsky's notion of love, I recommend deemphasizing the rigor with which he promotes the analogy *love: reason :: eyes: mind* and considering instead the ways in which he advocates the lover's role as "bottom."

At many turns in *Bottom*, Zukofsky undercuts and distances himself from both the singleminded vehemence of his definition and its "correctness" or superiority to other ways of reading Shakespeare. Most notably, he suggests early in the text that his definition of love, like the products of spontaneity and chance in Aristotle's *Physics*, is "incidental" (39). What seems to be *fundamental* (a word that echoes the bottom) and necessarily prior to the definition is the claim that, in Spinoza's words, the love object is one "of which we may never seize the *mastery*, ...of which no one is truly master" (16, emphasis added). For Zukofsky's definition of love, the loss of mastery is a prerequisite. The "cure" to this problem (for Zukofsky, following Spinoza, conceives it as a problem) would be to reduce the passions to as little a part of mental life as possible. Barring such an extremity, the lover's proper posture or attitude toward love requires submission and even self-abnegation: the posture or attitude, in other words, of the bottom.

The necessity and even desirability of bottoming extends, in Zukofsky's view, from erotic behavior to aesthetic and critical practice. When Zukofsky observes that "Ovid had exercised his mastery over Europe a long time," he does not bemoan the lack of so-called originality entailed by early modern writers' acquiescence to this mastery. Rather, he seems to delight in the ways in which Ovid's "thought...*penetrates* the smallest joints of words" written by Marlowe, Wyatt, and, of course, Shakespeare (28, emphasis added). Nor is it "incidental" that the thought of which Zukofsky writes is Ovid's thought about love. Bottoming as a lover and bottoming as an artist are

inextricably linked and perhaps mutually constitutive goods, so that we are left to wonder, when Zukofsky describes Shakespeare as a man with “a reputation for satisfying all comers,” whether he refers to the page, stage, or bedroom (28).

Given the content of *Bottom*, which is largely a string—if not stream—of quotations, Zukofsky himself clearly enjoys the pleasure of penetration by other voices that he identifies and approves in earlier writers. (In this regard, we should recall that Zukofsky’s contribution to *Bottom* is, after all, only one of two volumes and that the long second part of his essay is described as “notes” for—and thereby made subordinate to—Celia’s score for *Pericles*.) Moreover, in terms of its structure and genre, I would describe *Bottom* less as an effort of literary criticism than as a sort of closet drama. The likely section of *Bottom* to cite as evidence for this claim is its “Definition,” presented as a dialogue between “Son” and fatherly “I,” but the rest of the work also reads curiously, if less explicitly, like a play. Passages from many different sources are not just quoted, but juxtaposed (and often abridged) in such a way that they are put in sensible and meaningful *dialogue* with one another. Zukofsky seems, perversely, to find a precursor for his method in Spinoza, who, as he claims, “‘demonstrated’ geometrically but asserted *dramatically*” (94, emphasis added). Whatever drama is latent in Spinoza, Zukofsky makes manifest not only as a manner of argumentation, but also as a matter of form.

Insofar as *Bottom* may be read as a closet drama, it remains “closeted” or armchair-bound by its status as one man’s meditation, however much he ventriloquizes. In other words, the pleasure of penetration by other voices is coupled by the pleasure of speaking all the parts. When we read the father/son dialogue of the “Definition,” we might do well to remember Zukofsky’s quotation of Joyce much earlier in *Bottom*: “the Father was Himself His Own Son” (22). Even if we do not, we must still recognize the extent to which the “son,” who anticipates the father’s arguments and rehearses them in

a voice that draws ever nearer in tone and diction to that of the “I,” is simply a rhetorical prop, not an actual interlocutor.

The desire to play all the parts is, of course, Bottom’s desire, and the one for which David Román and Tim Miller cite him as a quintessentially queer performer.<sup>5</sup> If multiple, contradictory, and transgressive identifications are queer, then who could be queerer than the author of *Bottom*, who wants to speak not only as Wittgenstein and Julius Caesar, but also as Gertrude Stein and Julia?<sup>9</sup> And if, as Román and Miller further claim, “[q]ueer theater...is about conversion and transformation” (222), then what theater could be queerer than the imaginary one bound by *Bottom*’s covers, where disparate texts are transformed into a single graph of culture and all of Shakespeare’s words are converted into two: *love sees*.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> David Román and Tim Miller, “Preaching to the Converted,” *The Queerest Art: Essays on Lesbian and Gay Theater* (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 221.

<sup>6</sup> Of course, Zukofsky, by his own admission, fails to produce a coherent graph of culture, and, as I have tried to demonstrate, *Bottom* is full of energies that cannot be contained by the simple claim that *love sees*. I simply mean to suggest here that the *attempt* to produce such mad conversions and transformations may be understood as, in some sense, queer—and that its spectacular and self-consciously elaborated failure, which seems part of its very design, may make it even queerer.