

Re-Reading Louis Zukofsky's *Bottom: On Shakespeare*
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**Bottom Up:
Zukofsky's Henry Adams**

by Kaplan P. Harris
University of Notre Dame
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"Henry Adams dearly loved to show the facts bottom up."
—Zukofsky, "Henry Adams: A Criticism in Autobiography"¹

"Just re-read Education H.A. What a book! I believe he had buzzin' in his head my Bottom but didn't bother to tell anyone."
—Zukofsky to Lorine Niedecker²

Unlike Ezra Pound, who dismissed Henry Adams as "a life...split into bits,"³ Louis Zukofsky maintained vocal support for Adams nearly throughout his career. The support is signaled first in his master's thesis, which was eventually published as "Henry Adams: a Criticism in Autobiography." In it Zukofsky compiles passages from Adams's writings but with very little commentary to direct the reader. As Mark Scroggins observes, the thesis contains the "seeds"⁴ of Zukofsky's documentary writing, as later exemplified in *Bottom: On Shakespeare*. I have three observations about why Zukofsky takes a documentary approach to his subject. First, Zukofsky thinks Adam's writings can speak for themselves primarily because he thinks of Adams as a poet—which is to say that Zukofsky does not assume that just any language can speak for itself. Second, in Zukofsky's view, Adams is like a documentary historian. He "loved to show the facts bottom up" (P, 93). By documenting a documentary writer, Zukofsky thus imitates his subject. In the words of Barry Ahearn, "the torch has been passed."⁵ Third (and here I am at my most speculative), Zukofsky sees

documentary as a kind of autobiography. This complicates the assumption found in recent criticism that a documentary (especially poetic) is most successful when least subjective.

The thesis is the earliest and the longest selection in Zukofsky's collected essays.⁶ It is more than twice as long as the next longest selection. It is also more than half made up of quotations from Adams's writing, but with little commentary on Zukofsky's part. Even when Zukofsky comments on a passage, he is less concerned with analysis or explication than with clearing a space for the reader to experience the text. The result is a collage that more closely resembles a modernist poem than a piece of academic writing or literary criticism. But it would be going too far to construe the thesis as a work of textual radicalism. Zukofsky promulgates a view about the self-sufficiency of *poetic* language rather than language as such, and in this case the poet is Adams. The original title of the 1924 thesis was "Henry Adams: Detached Mind and Poetic Undertow: A Criticism in Autobiography."⁷ Although the subtitle was shortened for the 1930 publication, Zukofsky kept the point in his very first sentence: "These chapters on the writings of Henry Adams illustrate two actuating forces of his nature: poetic intellect is its continual undertow, and detached mind the strong surface current in the contrary direction" (*P*, 86). The "undertow" hearkens back to a Romantic conception of the poet. As Coleridge writes, "Our genuine admiration of a great poet is a continuous under-current of feeling; it is everywhere present, but seldom anywhere as a separate excitement."⁸

Zukofsky thinks that *all* of Adams's writing is poetry, not just his "verse" poems "Buddha and Brahma" and "Prayer to the Virgin of Chartres." He says of an essay by Adams: "The essay gave the impression of precise phraseology and order of thought—two prerequisites not the least important for a poet; and of hidden paradox not in the least dispensed by a wit" (*P*, 97). After quoting four uninterrupted excerpts from Adams's

multivolume *History of The United States during the Administrations of Thomas Jefferson and James Madison*, Zukofsky remarks, “Passage after passage must be quoted to give an adequate idea of the sentence rhythm, which always meets the subject with a master’s grace. Poetry, in the simple direct phrasing, is concentrate” (P, 106).

Not only does Adams emerge as a poet, but he emerges as a poet in Zukofsky’s camp. When the thesis was published in *The Hound and The Horn* (1930), Zukofsky added a “Postscript” that shows an affinity between Adams and William Carlos Williams.⁹ This point is obscured in *Prepositions +: The Complete Prose of Louis Zukofsky: Expanded* because the thesis and the postscript are found in separate sections. The postscript is grouped with several other pieces on Williams, and the only bibliographic information is the date of publication. Even its title, “Beginning again with William Carlos Williams,” is elided. Zukofsky carefully oversaw the editorial decisions for *Prepositions*, but in 1930, when he was 26 years old, he clearly wanted readers to see an affinity.¹⁰ It goes without saying that the 1924 thesis from his graduate study at Columbia University did not refer to such a nameless poet as William Carlos Williams. By adding the postscript Zukofsky transformed a work that was academic into a work that was now avant-garde. And by adding the affinity to Williams, Zukofsky transformed Adams from a figure of academic interest into an avant-garde precursor.

The second and no less important reason that Zukofsky takes a documentary approach to his subject is that he thinks of Adams as a documentary historian. As he says, “Henry Adams dearly loved to show the facts bottom up” (P, 93). What earns this characterization can be seen in Adams’s early essay on the mythologizing of John Smith in national history. By examining the two early versions of Smith’s account, “A True Relation of Virginia” (1608) and “The Generall Historie” (1624), Adams determines that textual inconsistencies produced “confusion” over the actual events for future generations. Rather than asking the

reader to simply take his word at face value, he wants the reader to see the texts first-hand. He even juxtaposes them in a way that anticipates the paratactic arrangement of certain twentieth century documentary works—such as those by Zukofsky. Adams writes: “In continuing the account of [Smith’s] captivity, the two narratives will be placed side by side, for convenience of comparison, and the principle variations will be printed in italics.”¹¹ The italics resonate of course with Zukofsky’s use of ellipses to highlight a text in *Bottom*. Here is what one selection looks like with the 1608 edition on the left and the 1624 edition on the right:

The next night I lodged at a hunting town of Powhatams, and the next day arrived at Waranacomoco upon the river of Pamaunke, where the great king is resident...

Arriving at Weramocomoco, their Emperour... kindly welcomed me with good wordes and great Platters of sundrie Victuals, *assuring mee his friendship, and my libertie within four dayes*...hee desired mee to forsake Paspahagh, and to live with him upon his River,—a Countrie called Capa Howasicke; hee promised to give me Corne, Venison, or what I wanted to feede us; Hatchets and Copper wee should make him, and none should disturbe us.

At his entrance before the King, all the people gave a great shout. The Queene of Appamatuck was appointed to bring him water to wash his hands, an another brought him a bunch of feathers instead of a Towell to dry them. *Having feasted him after their best barbarous manner they could, a long consultation was held; but the conclusion was, two great stones were brought before Powhatan; then as many as could lay their hands on him dragged him to them, and theron laid his head; and bein gready with their clubs to beate out his braines, Pocohantas, the King’s dearest daughter, when no intreaty could prevaile, got his head in her armes, and laid her owne upon his to save him from death; whereat the Emperour was conteneded he should live to make him hatchets, and her bells, beads, and copper...*

(CJS, 31-32)

The earlier report has “*friendship*” and “*libertie*,” and the second has “*clubs to beate out his braines*.” The second also has the last-minute intervention of Pocohantas which is completely absent in the first. Adams writes: “Comparison of the two narratives thus for the first time placed side by side, betrays a tone of exaggeration in the later story” (CJS, 33). He goes on to list with unusual care each of the “gradual additions” from the “hack-writer, who adapted his story for popular effect.” He shows that even professional historians are susceptible: “The spirit of Smith infused itself into the modern

historian, as it had already infused itself into the works of his predecessors. The lights were intensified; the shadows deepened; the gradations softened. The copy surpassed its model” (*CJS*, 37). He takes particular aim at his contemporary George Bancroft, whose *History of the United States* was a standard at the time. Bancroft is shown to wrongly attribute Smith’s rescue to the 1608 edition: “He saw something which did not exist,—the exaggerated image of a figure beyond” (*CJS*, 37). So according to Adams, there is nothing “beyond” the text.

Adams goes one step further by insinuating that documents are a threat to the self-image of certain Americans. He writes: “No American needs to learn that Pocahontas is the most romantic character in the history of his country. Her name and story are familiar to every schoolboy, and families of the highest claim to merit trace their descent from the Emperor’s daughter that saved the life of Captain John Smith” (*CJS*, 35). The documents that contradict this story have the potential to inflict damage on “families of the highest claim,” but also on the national education system that indoctrinates “every schoolboy”—and this of course includes Adams himself.

I think this latter, personal inflection is very similar to a critique made by Susan Howe:

An idea of the author Emily Dickinson—her symbolic value and aesthetic function—has been shaped by *The Poems of Emily Dickinson; Including variant readings critically compared with all known manuscripts*, edited by Thomas H. Johnson and first published by the Belknap Press of Harvard University in 1951, later digested into a one-volume edition, to which I do not refer because of Johnson’s further acknowledged editorial emendations. For a long time I believed this editor had give us the poems as they looked.¹²

The terms “symbolic value and aesthetic function” are straight out of New Historicism, but the personal dimension (“For a long time I believed...”) corresponds more closely with Adams. When Howe finally sees the original manuscripts, she revises her long-held views about Dickinson. This leads Howe to reevaluate her understanding of what it means to be a poet. For Adams and Howe, an oppositional documentary is like a fuse for internal revolution. If we assume that official history imposes a structure of identity that is most conducive to the prevailing social order, then the fallout from an oppositional documentary is not limited to simply contesting that history. By challenging a

mythologized past or exposing the ideology of a social body, a documentary has the potential to breach the fortifications of self-identity.

This leads me to my final and admittedly most speculative observation about Zukofsky's documentary approach in the thesis. The widespread opinion in recent criticism is that a documentary form is most successful when least subjective.¹³ But Zukofsky seems to believe that documents might actually produce an autobiographical "portrait" of the writer: "In [*Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres*], whatever Adams translated, either the poetry of the court, or the chansons de geste, or the cathedral arch, or the miracles of Our Lady, he rendered not only the spirit of an age, but his own portrait" (P, 117). How does Zukofsky reconcile his two ostensibly competing claims: Adams as documentary historian and Adams as autobiographer? After all, the title of the thesis is "Henry Adams: A Criticism in *Autobiography*." Zukofsky says:

...Adams' development as a writer reflects the process of education as he saw it in his autobiography. The autobiographical matter of *The Education* has, therefore, been quoted throughout the essay in order to offset the works as situations in 'the process.'
(P, 87)

I think Zukofsky conflates autobiography with the "process of education." This is understandable given that the title of Adams's autobiography is *The Education of Henry Adams*. The implication, however, is to redefine what counts as autobiography. Conventional autobiography is made up of stories about personal growth, family, career, social life, and so forth. It locates the writer outside of education, as a graduate, a product, a finished being. But for Zukofsky (and I suppose Adams too), autobiography is a matter of education that is still on-going. Notice that Zukofsky puts "process" in quotation marks, as if to suggest the "process" cannot be presented directly. In such a case, representational stories of the self are only a minor part of the greater whole that is autobiography. Rather than an education that produces a monolithic "I" to narrate the work, an autobiography can instead feature a dark education (or what Adams calls his "failure") which throws the self of the writer in question. Such an autobiography is less a containment of self-understanding than an

opening or exposure to its other. I think such an other might be foregrounded by “the facts bottom up.” A text comprised entirely of documents might thus be thought of as a new kind of autobiography.

Recall that late in life Zukofsky refers to *Bottom: On Shakespeare* as an “autobiography” (P, 167). This statement can be understood in several ways, as for example the running record of his intellectual efforts, and hence an autobiography (an interpretation supported when he says that it “shows him up” (P, 167)), or perhaps as an amusing joke on the fact that his father ironed pants for a living (i.e. bottoms). But if we understand *Bottom: On Shakespeare* to be his exposure to history and the world through its documentation, then Zukofsky renders, as he says of Adams, “not only the spirit of an age, but his own portrait.”

¹ Louis Zukofsky, *Preposition+: The Collected Critical Essay*. Additional Prose edited by Mark Scroggins (Hanover: Wesleyan U P, 2000), p. 93. Henceforth abbreviated as *P*.

² Quoted by Barry Ahearn in “The Adams Connection,” *Paideuma*, vol. 7. No.3. (1978), p. 479. This undated letter is from Zukofsky’s unpublished correspondence, courtesy of the Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin, and Celia Zukofsky.

³ Ezra Pound, “The Jefferson-Adams Letters as a Shrine and a Monument,” *Selected Prose: 1909-1965* (New York: New Directions, 1975), p. 152. According to Pound, Henry Adams represents a dissolution of the cultural heritage that was handed down by his great-grandfather, president John Adams. Pound prefers for a “still workable dynamo” (147) not anything from Henry Adams but rather the correspondence between Jefferson and John Adams. See also Pound’s chapter, “The Decline of the Adamses” in *Guide to Kulchur* (New York: New Directions, 1970), p.254.

⁴ Mark Scroggins, *Louis Zukofsky: Towards an Epistemological Poetics* (Tuscaloosa: U Alabama P, 1998), p. 86.

⁵ Ahearn, *ibid.*, p.481.

⁶ Responses to the thesis have been mixed. Sandra Kumamoto Stanley considers Adams a “representative of a defunct American aristocracy”(26) that Zukofsky sought to understand in order to create alternative. This is problematic in my view because it overlooks the materialist side of Adams that would have made him an appealing figure. More persuasively, Ahearn says that despite the different backgrounds between the two writers, “Time and time again Zukofsky tended to see himself as Adams’ successor” (479). Sandra Kumamoto Stanley, *Louis Zukofsky and the Transformation of a Modern American Poetics* (Berkeley: U California P, 1994). For more on the relationship between Zukofsky and Adams see Peter Quartermain who “sees more and more of Adams in Zukofsky’s work” in *Disjunctive Poetics: from Gertrude Stein and Louis Zukofsky to Susan Howe* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1992), p.70-89. Charles Bernstein appeals to a kind of reciprocity between the historian and the poet: “Zukofsky’s elected affinity with Adams, in which he casts Adams as poet in the cloak of historian, sets the stage for his use of Adams in “A”-8, where it might be said that he casts himself as historian in the cloak of poet” (*P*, xi).

⁷ Louis Zukofsky, “Henry Adams: Detached Mind and Poetic Undertow: A Criticism in Autobiography,” May 7, 1924. Louis Zukofsky Papers, Box 13, File 9, Harry Ransom Research Center, University of Texas, Austin. The original thesis is henceforth abbreviated as *T*. [NB: The original thesis will be discussed further at symposium but it is not quoted in this paper for reasons of permission.]

⁸ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria, or Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions*, ed. James Englell and W. Jackson Bate (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1983), p.23.

⁹ Louis Zukofsky, "Beginning again with William Carlos Williams," *Hound and the Horn* 4:2 (Jan-Mar, 1931), p. 261.

¹⁰ See Mark Scroggins on the editing process: "*Prepositions* is Zukofsky's last word on his short critical prose. It presents his essays in the order, arrangement, and form that he most preferred" (*P*, 177).

¹¹ Henry Adams, "Captaine John Smith," in *A Henry Adams Reader*, ed. Elizabeth Stevenson (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1958), p. 29. Henceforth abbreviated as *CJS*.

¹² Susan Howe, *The Birth-Mark: Unsettling the Wilderness in American Literary History* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan UP, 1993), p. 131.

¹³ See for example Ming-Quin Ma who argues that quotations in *The Cantos* are no more than "Pound's mouthpieces," meaning that "quotations are used as stage lighting for 'the dance of the intellect among words.'" Ma says that Zukofsky is more successful because "quotations are themselves the dance, occupying center stage of the poem." So Pound subordinates the document to his own subjective agenda while Zukofsky releases the document to move freely inside the text of the poem. The assumption is that the most successful documentary form is the least autobiographical. Ming-Qian Ma, "A 'no man's land!' Postmodern Citationality in Zukofsky's 'Poem beginning 'The,'" in *Upper Limit Music: The Writing of Louis Zukofsky*, ed. Mark Scroggins (Tuscaloosa, Ala: U. Alabama P, 1997), p. 136.