

Re-Reading Louis Zukofsky's *Bottom: On Shakespeare*
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Dreaming in Characters
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Anyone who explains Shakespeare, says Zukofsky at the outset of *Bottom*, dreams in character. At one level, he seems to suggest a critical commonplace: writers writing about other writers invariably end up writing about themselves. The following thoughts, largely inspired by conversations with Gregg Biglieri, explore some other possible meanings for this enigmatic opener to a work that is anything but single-minded.

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On the last page of the *Ember Eves* section in Part III, the poet quotes from his keynote text:

Moon

This lanthorne doth the horned Moone present:
My selfe, the man i the Moon doth seeme to be.

Theseus

This is the greatest error of all the rest: the man
should be put into the Lanthorne. How is it els the
man i the Moone? (347)

Yes, we might ask, how? A clue to the answer can be found in an earlier citation from Christopher Smart:

For the MOON is an intelligence . . .
For the phenomenon of the horizontal moon is the truth she appears bigger
in the horizon because she actually is so. (198)

Smart, writing in bedlam, unites for Zukofsky the figures of (moon-mad) lunatic, lover, and poet in a willed definition of illusion as truth: the moon on the horizon appears large because she communicates with the earth and when she rises has been strengthened by the Sun, who cherishes her by night. What you see is what you beget. Here we have as clear an example as any of Zukofsky's perverse citational

practice: the scholar-poet citing the madman-poet justifying the manifest illusions of clear sight by recourse to an allegory of love.

It is allegory, of course, that Zukofsky consistently disavows as a modality for reading, writing, making sense of things. In this he aligns himself with Theseus's literalism. Starveling the tailor, playing Moon, stands for/stands under the sign of the man in the moon, but not actually in it. Standing under and understanding are not all one, *pace* Launce's line from *Two Gentlemen of Verona*. One of the many ironies of *Bottom* is that although its author is so allergic to allegory that he fails to include the word in his capacious index, he nonetheless manages to create in this work a vast allegory of the life in words by taking word-life literally.

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The moon, for example, is an intelligence in more ways than one. Waxing into the shape of an O (emblem of Shakespeare's wooden staging ground), moon itself contains two open eyes, two Os, looking back at us, reversing the human gaze from earth to heaven. The moon is thus a character in at least two senses, as the figure of a person, an agency (the man in the moon), and as the figure of a letter. Further: the moon and O chime unavoidably with the fundamental obsession with posteriors, or *a posteriori* fundamentalism, that runs through *Bottom* like wicked subterranean laughter, and which, in linking the clear eye with its unclear counterpart, Shakespeare's nether eye, posits the question of their uneasy relation. Face and ass: the one expressive, the other expressionless, two ends of the human coign of vantage, both alike in the indignity of signifying part and whole, ends and means, letter and figure, dual phases of our sublunary character. Well shone Moone (347).

You could say that the relation between these two, person and letter, becomes the secret basis for *Bottom*'s argument. Its perversity consists in far more than simply reading through Shakespeare's verse in support of an insupportable conclusion. (*Bottom*'s end is no more conclusive than its beginning.) In seeking to identify the source of life in Shakespeare's language, to determine what makes it active beyond the usage of any other English poet, Zukofsky flirts with a different sort of perversity: the elision of personhood with letterhood, of clear sight with close reading, of love with the mind's peace confronted with the object of reading's gaze.

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Looking under O in *Bottom*'s index, we find a single citation from Sir Thomas Overbury on What a Character Is: Character comes from this infinite mood . . . that signifyeth to engrave, or make a deep impression. And for that cause, a letter (as A.B.) is called a character. . . . (177) (From Christopher Smart, again: 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 [197]). Immediately following the Overbury, Zukofsky cites Shakespeare's sonnet 59:

Oh that record could with a back-ward looke,
Even of five hundred courses of the Sunne,

Show me your image in some antique booke,
Since minde at first in carrecter was done. (177)

Minde in carracter is writing, the literal letters of thought, but also images of sight, the eyes of double Os in look and book. This iteration of reading's look chimes with the double-take of Bassanio's sincere gaze that Portia mocks in *Merchant of Venice*

In both my eyes he doubly sees himself,
In each eye, one. Swear by your double self,
And there's an oath of credit. (85)

Seen from one perspective, *Bottom* is one long proof that for Zukofsky, the text reads the reader as much as the reader reads the text. Self-reflexivity, in Joel Fineman's sense, becomes the inescapable condition of a reciprocal relation in which reader and text strive for a kind of Hegelian recognition from one another, but are confronted in the process with Karl Kraus's word that, the closer we stare at it, stares more distantly back at us. Reading backward then suggests itself as a method for reversing *Bottom*'s perversity, a method that the text itself solicits, taking us from O to I, from Z to A.

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David Melnick concludes, in his penetrating essay on *Bottom*, that the reader discovers what he has suspected all along, that Zukofsky's world has no room for people in it (64). Not quite: for Zukofsky, words *are* people. But what is entailed by this personification of language should give us pause. If character encompasses the senses of letter, person or role, and ethical identity all variously cited throughout *Bottom* it's worth noting that the poet articulates these senses by asserting the ethical constitution and autonomy of the literal facts of language: The basis for written characters, for words, must be the physiological fact of love, arising from sight (17). At the same time, the action of characters carries an unavoidable double valence, marked by the tension between characters as persons marked by identities, independent histories and characters as roles or personas.

Beyond these meanings, Zukofsky's sense of words (images of thought) and letters (images of words) ultimately focuses our attention on a vision of primary linguistic units that are, like quantum particles, fundamentally oblivious to the laws of time. They can work both ways, forward and backward, as dog or god, and this essential reversibility speaks to the timelessness that Zukofsky finds in Shakespeare's work as a whole and to a vision of language unburdened by history one that is instead, like Bach's *Art of Fugue*, three-dimensional, rotatable, crystalline. Dreaming in character becomes the method for a reading out of context, focused on words and the elements of words.