

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

Jessica Smith

SUNY Buffalo: Dept. of Comparative Literature

October 2003

The Aesthetic Implications of "Julia's Wild"¹

Just as Louis Zukofsky places himself within a tradition of poetic virtuosity that includes Homer and Shakespeare in *Bottom*, he places himself within a tradition of lyric poetry in *A*. He states,

I'll tell you.

About my poetics—

...

An integral

Lower limit speech

Upper limit music²

Indeed, we see this aesthetic at work in his poems. The final section of *A* and a large portion of *Bottom* consist of Zukofsky's poems set to Celia Thaew Zukofsky's music. *A* begins with a tribute to Bach's *St. Matthew's Passion*; *Bottom* quotes from a plethora of philosophers, composers and librettos. By establishing himself along these multiple historical strands, Zukofsky argues that the poet stands within a three-fold tradition. He is a philosopher (albeit with limited knowledge of the truth and limited ability to convey it); he is

¹ Many of the sentences in this essay can be exploded into new points. Thus, a hypertext version of my commentary on *Bottom* will be available at <http://www.acsu.buffalo.edu/~jss13/bottom/> as of 1 Nov. 2003.

a poet (in the seer tradition of Homer; in the virtuoso tradition of Shakespeare and Homer); and he is a composer.

A's proximity to music is clear to the reader who has been trained in reading 20th century poetry, which uses line breaks and the positioning of words on the page to “score” the poetry so that the reader can recreate the sound the author supposedly heard in his mind. Because much of *Bottom* quotes prose passages, it often seems less like music and more like a philosophical treatise, which is perhaps why Celia Thaew Zukofsky redeems it with a long musical setting. However, many subtle qualities make *Bottom* musical. These include Zukofsky's careful use of quotation and his occasional burst into musical poetry. He edits the quotations he finds to reveal particular truths (which are not necessarily the ones originally indicated by the passages quoted) and to highlight sonic qualities. Although he often quotes long sections of prose in order to prove a point, he just as often quotes from Homer's and Shakespeare's melodious poetry or from librettos written specifically to accompany music. Juxtaposed with philosophical treatises, the lyrical poem highlights the lyricism of philosophical language. Everything engaged in *Bottom* becomes Zukofsky's poem; and, per his aesthetics, Zukofsky's *Bottom* constantly approaches the sonority of music.

In the section entitled “J,” or “Julia's Wild,”³ Zukofsky breaks into a fugue. The fugue's subject is a line from *The Two Gentleman of Verona*, “Come, shadow, come, and take this shadow up.” The poem “rings a change” on the line, evolving as follows:

Come shadow, come, and take this shadow up,
 Come shadow shadow, come and take this up,
 Come, shadow, come, and take this shadow up,
 Come, come shadow, and take his shadow up,

² Louis Zukofsky, “*A*” (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1993) 138

Come, come and shadow, take this shadow up,
 Come, up, come shadow and take this shadow,
 And up, come take shadow, come this shadow,
 And up, come, come shadow, take this shadow....⁴

The poem's words work like the letters in an anagram, and the meaning shifts as the parts of the poem change context. Similar to Zukofsky's other fugues like "Hear her clear mirror"⁵ and the poems of *80 Flowers*, the fugue of "Julia's Wild" plays with a delicate balance. On the one hand, the poem's alteration of the single original theme shows the crucial importance of syntax to meaning. The content of each line rests on the positioning of the words in that line; thus each of the "Hear her clear mirror" Valentine poems seems to say something different, and that which "comes" and "takes up" shifts in "Julia's Wild." On the other hand, this poem—like the other fugues—constantly stands at the edge of nonsense. It approaches music in a way that few poems do, by reducing words to almost meaningless materials and arranging them like notes.

If we look at the fugue poems without choosing to value music over poetry, however, we find that these poems comment on the nature of music as much as Zukofsky wants music to comment on the nature of poetry. We come to recognize two important aspects of music that correspond to the balancing of meaning and nonsense mentioned above. First, as in "Julia's Wild," music (like meaning) relies on difference and syntax. Music is often conceived of as a flow of sounds over time. It has long been classified as a "successive" art because it seems that it is perceived only in time—as time passes, so musical themes unfold. However, a perception of musical themes as simple as "melody" or "here

³ Louis Zukofsky, *Bottom* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 2002), 393-94

⁴ Ibid. 393

⁵ Louis Zukofsky, "With a Valentine (the 14 February)," *Songs of Degrees* (xx, xx, xxxx)

the music begins and here it ends” relies on syntax. Syntax is the ability to perceive one element (of music, speech, etc.) as before or after another. This perception of temporal relations in turn relies on the spatialization of memory. Memory places one object, sound, or word before or after another and so allows one to perceive that one thing has taken another’s place. If this spatial memory were not engaged while listening to music, one note would so erase another that one could not perceive “music” or “melody” or any organization of sounds. The second point extends from the first. If we use a memory to record in a sort of virtual space, the order of sounds in a piece of music, then music is as material as it is temporal.⁶

“Julia’s Wild” (and Zukofsky’s other fugue poems) thus calls attention to the spatiality of music by showing the relation between the supposedly “more” material medium of words on a page, and the supposedly less material medium of music. In order to differentiate this kind of poetry, which “rings a change”⁷ from a specific set of initial material, from other subgenres of poetry, I will call this kind the “code poem.” Code poems are a subgenre of the genre I call “Plastic poems.” Plastic poems straddle the aesthetically separate categories of visual art and music by calling attention to the concomitance of space and time (simultaneity and succession).

Code poems are distinct from other subgenres of Plastic poetry, which all work on the reader’s mind differently. Code poems mimic DNA in their recombinant structure; they force the reader to decode their patterns; and they bring to light the mnemonic encoding operative in the reader’s understanding of syntax. The code poem recombines a limited

⁶ Moreover, music is *really* linked to spatiality in that it is played by physical human gestures interacting with physical instruments. The “art” of music—that quality that makes music good or bad—is contingent upon the gesture: the “touch” of virtuoso musicians.

⁷ After introducing “Julia’s Wild” on *Bottom* 393, Zukofsky quotes correspondence from Cid Corman where Corman asked him to “ring a change” on the original line from *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*.

amount of poetic material to offer multiple meanings. Poems with this recombinant quality have been described as “fugues” by Louis Zukofsky, as “crystals” by Christian Bök, as “anagrams” by Michael Lentz (and others), and as “gathas” by Jackson Mac Low. Although these names range from the static-corporeal (crystal) to the dynamic-incorporeal (fugues); from the logical (anagrams) to the spiritual (gathas), all of the poems produced under these titles reinforce a single syntactical theorem: spatial memory allows for the perception of temporal differences. These poems are utterly reliant on difference for their content, as well as for the pleasure of their aural and visual arrangement. They thereby rely on the reader’s ability to remember what came before, in order to establish a difference with what comes next. The content is as much in this interplay of slight changes, as in the normal “source” of content (the “meaning” of the words). At the most basic level, memory is an inscription of information—even the basic distinction that *this* is different than *that* requires a mnemonic tracing. Thus, *code poems require spatial encoding*. Concomitant with this spatiality, however, is temporality. One makes spatial traces in time; and it is indeed only the passage of time and emergence of new spaces that reveals difference. Thus, code poems happen within a temporal schema of past-future which must be able to be retraced (future-past) in order to establish the difference between what is being read now, and what was read before. The ability to recognize these temporally situated differences is inherent to all reading, speech, music, etc.; but the code poem highlights this condition of perception by experimenting with it with simple gestures.

The code poem, like musical fugues, twists its material and generates new cadences from one original phrase. This musicality requires two things, one of which is essentially spatial, and the other of which is essentially spatio-temporal: material and memory. Whether sound or pigment, the materials used for art are *material*. In all art, as in all perception and

language, memory figures both spatially and temporally: it organizes space in time and time in space with the barest syntax. In being like music, the code poem points to the materiality of music, and challenges the historical aesthetics that would place the written word lower in a hierarchy with respect to the transcendence of temporally flowing music.