

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

To better understand the seemingly hermetic *Bottom: On Shakespeare*, we would be well served to consider the role of this title character within Zukofsky's work. The clownish victim of metamorphosis in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is not only representational of the pinnacle and base of Shakespearean thought for Zukofsky, but a vehicle of the very telling process of quotational elision which permeates his work. Zukofsky's use of elision does not simply designate the superfluous in his quotations; his use of elision often leaves out information critical to the presented quotes. The critic as arbiter of honest representation might well regard this method as irresponsible within a critical text. Then again, recognizing *Bottom: on Shakespeare* as a poetic text (as Zukofsky himself suggests in *Bottom: a Weaver*) should allow poetic licence, and perhaps a new understanding of Zukofsky's poetics by recognizing the site of elision as a moment of insertion and redirection of information, rather than simply a conventional absence or removal of text.

As exhibit one, let us examine the preface to *Bottom: on Shakespeare*. The most crucial passage in all of Shakespeare for Zukofsky may be Bottom's soliloquy after his liaisons with Titania:

God's my life! Stolen hence, and left me asleep? –I have
had a most rare vision. I have had a dream past the wit
of man to say what dream it was. Man is but an ass if he
go about to expound this dream. Methought I was –
there is no man can tell what. Methought I was, and

methought I had – but man is but a patched fool if he will offer to say what methought I had. 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. I will get Peter Quince to write a ballad of this dream. It shall be called 'Bottom's Dream,' because it hath no bottom, and I will sing it in the latter end of a play, before the Duke. Per-adventure, to make it the more gracious, I will sing it at her death.

(*MND* IV.i.208-224)

The passage comprises the first words from the preface to *Bottom: on Shakespeare*, and provides the basis for Zukofsky's anti-epistemological parallel of "love: reason :: eye : mind" (*Bottom* 39). Before continuing, it would be prudent to consider the source of the above soliloquy. Frank Kermode traces the passage back to a warbled interpretation of the epistolary New Testament:

It must be accepted that this [passage] is a parody of I Corinthians ii. 9 ff.:

Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man the things which God hath prepared for them that love him ... Which things we also speak, not in the words which man's wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth...

Apuleius, after his transformation, might not speak of the initiation he underwent, but he was vouchsafed a vision of the goddess Isis. St. Paul was initiated into the religion he had persecuted by Ananias in Damascus. What they have in common is transformation, and an experience of divine love.

(Kermode 219)

What Kermode describes is a transformation of character, but it is important to note that the exposition of Bottom's dream is equally transformatory. Eyes no longer hear, and ears no longer see: the senses intertwine and develop through a process of divine language taught by superhuman forces. And while it is beyond the wit of man to report the dream, it seems quite possible that Peter Quince can write a ballad of the dream and have it presented before the heroic Duke of Athens on his nuptial night. Art, in this instance, can present what wit

alone is unable to speak. It is because the senses are transformed in a logic of language that the dream can be represented to the Duke. The *confusion/ transformation/ artifice* inherent in language's artistic transmission make possible a representation of Bottom's divine experience. If Shakespearean comedy is characterized by resolution, then Bottom's experience with Titania is the pivotal point in a pivotal comedy: it is a Shakespearean meta-fulcrum. It is a point in the bard's canon where gods interact with men, where the metamorphosis is real, where the magic drugs are working their magic. While the mortal lovers fall asleep, the gods and transformed are ever so awake in the fulcrum of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (MND).

It is the exploration of the divine moment that Zukofsky takes as a theme for poetry- Bottom is consulting his surroundings, questioning his new servants, bringing his knowledge of the world of reality into the world of the divine. Bottom's twisted monologue is not merely a moment of summary but an actual ardent moment of Being. Zukofsky's poetic project can be illuminated by an examination of his choice to use Bottom's soliloquy as the initial moment in his discussion of Shakespeare.

"A"-12 heralds extensive quotations from Shakespeare, both *verbatim* and abridged *verbatim*, the most significant of which come from MND. The most significant text chosen from MND is that of the actual moments of Bottom's dream/ reality, the actual presentation of the mythical moment of apotheosis and catharsis in the play. The text of MND that Zukofsky quotes in the vital section of "A"-12 is the cathartic moment wherein Titania professes her enchanted love for the translated Bottom, fresh from singing his fear-banning ode to birds. However, some critical elements seem to be missing. Zukofsky's text is below:

Titania bespeaks these feet:

What angel wakes me

From my flowery bed?
Gentle mortal, sing again.

So is mine eye
Enthrall'd to thy shape –

The weaver's dobbin bobbles:
Methinks, mistress,
You should have little reason for that;
And yet, to say the truth,
Reason and love keep little company together
Now-a-days.
The pity
... some honest neighbors will
Not make them friends.

(“A”-12, 133)

In the stanzaic spaces of the above passage, we miss perhaps the most enchanting and
cathartic moment of Titania's bespoken feet:

Titania I pray thee, gentle mortal, sing again.
Mine ear is much enamoured of thy note;
So is mine eye enthralled to thy shape;
And thy fair virtue's force perforce doth move me
On the first view to say, to swear, I love thee.

(*MND* III.i.140-144)

What is missing seems quite significant: three of the five lines are omitted, including a direct reference to Bottom's singing abilities and Titania's profession of love. One could place the omissions into the realm of the assumed and give Zukofsky the benefit of good editing; of course, this assumes that Shakespeare's text is redundant in some way, at least by 20th century standards of editing practice. For example, Titania need not mention that her “ear is much enamoured” of Bottom's music if she has asked him to sing again, and the removal of “I pray thee” could be regarded as expunging unnecessary introductory remarks. However, the final two lines of Titania's speech are a move to the three words “I love thee”: Shakespeare builds up the suspense by delaying, rhyming internally, referring to the ‘ear’ and ‘eye’ of the

previous two lines with the reference to ‘view’ as well as ‘saying’, and finally repeating and augmenting infinitives before the final words. Shakespeare is making these words very conspicuous, and their absence in Zukofsky’s elided reproduction of the scene is even more conspicuous.

Considering the cathartic nature of this scene, the words “I love thee” are perhaps both the height of comedy and the depth of pathos in *MND*. Instead of reproducing the cathartic moment in its entirety, Zukofsky, taking a page from Bottom's twisted monologue, moves to a mundane subject or perhaps a low joke, stating "The weaver's dobbin bobbles"; noting that the weaver's horse bobbles and/or bobs, or that Zukofsky as poet-weaver must stumble at this point, or he points to *The Merchant of Venice* for an example of why he cannot reproduce the sublime moment in a referential work and opts for comedy instead¹.

Zukofsky is unabashedly revamping the cathartic moment, one of the holiest of holies in the western tradition: in that moment he has chosen to edit, shorten, and excerpt. These techniques provide a canonical scene with what they lack as generally quoted tradition: an ardent presence. If the purpose of “A”-12 is to explain Zukofsky’s poetics and history in order to propel the poem into the realm of ardent action rather than explanation, one of the primary acts of quoting *MND* in this manner is to allow the poem to exist as a function of the present 'eyes' rather than the abstract 'mind.'

Bottom is a weaver, and the position of weaver is the nominal link, the pun, if you will, between Zukofsky the author and Bottom the character in both “A” and *Bottom: on*

¹ Keeping in mind the horse imagery in both *Bottom* and “A”, we should expect that the intrusion of horses has special import, and *ergo* it is not surprising to find that the word ‘dobbin’ occurs only twice in Shakespeare: both times in the same scene in *The Merchant of Venice* by the clownish figure of Lancelot Gobbo and his father. It is a reuniting of family, where blind old Gobbo must identify his son by other than his “sand-blind” eyes (II.ii.77). In the comedic moment where old Gobbo tries to identify his son by feeling the back of his head rather than his face (suggesting the biblical moment where Jacob tricks Isaac), the comparison drawn is to

Shakespeare. As a weaver, Bottom is not simply a purveyor of tapestry, but the *poet extraordinaire* of *MND*. Looking through Shakespeare's works, the word 'weaver' is not only used to describe the clothmaker but also the spinner of words². Our resident weaver, Bottom, sings in the woods to stave off fear after his transformation in the beginning of the third act of *MND*. Apart from the nominal position of weaver in *MND*, Bottom is also the most important actor in the troupe which presents *Pyramus and Thisbe* at Theseus' royal nuptials; and as noted before, Bottom is the hinge between which reality and fantasy, nobility and commonness bend: through his words separate worlds are woven together. Zukofsky's adoption of a weaver-persona is therefore not unexpected, being both a singer and combiner of words where the upper limit of his poetics is music, and the lower limit speech ("A"-12, 138). Zukofsky's words, like Bottom's words, possess an unreliable bent: both weavers get words wrong and make mistakes to enhance meaning. "The weaver's dobbin bobbles," so to speak, and in the bobbling of the dobbin come the intriguing sidebars which are an integral part of "A"'s poetics ("A"-12, 133).

No great surprise, then, that as readers we should find a similar form of elision occurring in *Bottom: on Shakespeare*. The bathetic moment of tragedy in act five, during the play within the play, is similarly cut short during its quotation in the second section of "Ember Eves," representing the letter 'E' in *Bottom's* "Alphabet of Subjects." Illumination and shadow are the narrative threads of the quotations comprising "E," talk of what is visible and what is not. While the opening tissue of quotations is presented more or less in

Dobbin, the fill-horse's tail. In a cathartic moment without the benefit of sight, the sacred reference is profaned with a comparison to the mundane and personal.

² Apart from *MND*, we find 'weaver' used in particularly interesting ways in *King Henry IV* part one, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, and *Twelfth Night*. The weaver is referred to as a singer in both *Twelfth Night* and *King Henry IV* part one, either with the ability to "sing psalms or any thing" (*1 Henry IV* II.iv.137-148) or metaphorically bringing men's souls forth out of their bodies, as the ironic musical "catch that will draw three souls out of one

chronological order (excluding the epigram), the second part moves between one version of Shakespeare's *MND* and what, for Zukofsky, is ostensibly his present, the year 1960. Words and empirical observations are suggested to have a deep historical and philosophical import not fully realizable in their initial observations. In such a section as "E," it is not surprising to find that the quotations are elided, only a partial illumination of their sources. Half-quotes by Francis Bacon point to judgment and leave out the idea of the *will* of the author to secret information from the reader (*Bottom*, 342-43). We are being led down a path of light by half-lights here, and Zukofsky is demanding that we pay attention to what is only half-present, demanding that we look for elision in the glancing shadows.

What of *MND*'s bathetic moment, then, and why is it excised? At first glance, only those quotes dealing with light are presented, and the text from act five of *MND* presents mainly quotes dealing with light and the role of 'Moon' in the play within the play (*Bottom*, 346-47). One might surmise that the moments of apotheosis, not dealing with light, do not apply to Zukofsky's argument in the section, hence removed; this unfortunately is not the case. If ever there were a quote to fit with the concepts of the song of ember-eves, it would be: "Tongue, lose thy light;/ Moon, take thy flight./ Now die, die, die, die, die", an action to which Pyramus obediently adheres, and touching on elements of both light and song (*MND*, V.i.298-300). Thisbe then finds her lover by starlight, for the moon has disappeared (V.i.308). Rather than accepting the pinnacle of emotion given by Shakespeare, Zukofsky instead has the whole scene end before the lovers' untimely demise, taking instead for his moment of truth the Lion's bathetic roar: "'Oh'" (*Bottom*, 347). Staying true to form, Zukofsky's elision has removed another cathartic moment from *MND*.

weaver," (*Twelfth Night* II.iii.48-64) suggesting that the hypothetical singing weaver will himself be enraptured by the drunken choruses of Sir Andrew Aguecheek and Sir Toby Belch.

Through *Bottom: on Shakespeare and "A"*, Zukofsky tackles the two tragicomic peaks of *MND*: the cathartic moment of Bottom's dream, which heralds a sort of divine transformation, and the deaths of Pyramus and Thisbe, the bathetic moments which allow the play within the play to conclude and eventually return the viewer to 'reality.' There is a two-part function to the absencing and relocation of the site of climatic apotheosis or bathos through elision. First, the process is an imitation of Shakespeare's Bottom, who 'fouls up' the speech from Corinthians, conflating terms and misrepresenting text in the divine moment of quotation. This is ultimately Zukofsky as weaver as Bottom, posing as linguistic klutz, yet willfully revealing both more and less than appears on the printed page. What Zukofsky does in elision is not only a) point the quote back *toward* the source text by indicating its lack of integrity, b) imply and highlight the simultaneous reconstitution and removal of the elided material back into the fragmented quote, but c) realize the potential for authorial intent in the act of removal and reconstitution, suggesting further avenues for meaning.

There may be for Zukofsky a second, more ethical function of elision. Misrepresentation is a profoundly human feature, but elision also demonstrates an impossibility of reproduction, and an ethical stance toward the source, that is, *not naming* it. Just as YHWH is God, just as Shakespeare misquotes Paul at the moment of divine apotheosis, Zukofsky in turn misquotes Shakespeare at the moment of catharsis, a moment not just misquoted in words but giving respect and hallowing by not naming at all. Instead, at the key moments, the weaver's "dobbin bobbles," allowing for moments of meaning given through silence rather than presence, deferring the moment of climactic emotion and substituting meaning from outside the physical space of the text. Zukofsky compares Shakespeare's pronouncements "to an old Chinese proverb - *What the eyes cannot see, the heart*

cannot crave," and it seems that Zukofsky has chosen to take the phrase to heart, to not to show us the critical junctures, so our hearts cannot crave them (*Bottom*, 266). All our eyes are permitted is a view of the ardent, present moment of Shakespeare. Our minds, trapped in other books, continue to race.

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