

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

At Face Value: Bones among the Epitaphs

Sasha Steensen

In his essay on Ezra Pound, Zukofsky writes:

"Only speech transforms whatever skeleton remains of the past and conveys judgment of it to the intelligence. Try as a poet may for objectivity, for the past to relive itself, not for his living the historical data, he can do only one of two things: get up a most brief catalog of antiquities (people become dates, epitaphs), or use this catalog and breathe upon it, so that it lives as his music. The latter action need not falsify the catalog" (*Prepositions* 73).

Bottom is, though not so brief, a catalogue of quotes that become epitaphs. These quotes are soundings from the deceased and from the past. But these are not epitaphs for individuals who stay buried, rather through the process of rewriting their words, Zukofsky breathes upon them, and they live in *his* music. He tracks the billions of sonic faults that lie buried, both underground, among the decaying bodies, and on library shelves, among the decaying pages of books traditional Shakespearean scholars have never thought to open. Trekking across time's faultlines and tracking the undertones by which we locate these faultlines is to move along a line of melody, since, as Mozart tells us, "Time makes melody" (*Bottom* 417). Excavation and composition are the labors of love that must replace chronological ordering if we are to say, as Henry James does, "It's absurd...to talk of our not 'knowing' [Shakespeare]. So far as we don't it's because we are dunces. He's in the thing, over his ears, and the more we get into it the more we're with Him. I seem to myself at any rate...to *see* Him in it as if He were painted on the wall" (*Bottom* 99).

The energy that has been spent on dating the plays and poems and searching for the "true" identity of Shakespeare, Zukofsky argues, is a testament to our blindness and our lack of love for the work itself. On page one of Part One, Zukofsky complains: "Guessing at the chronology of the forty-four items of the canon, the critics have been insistent on seeing his ideas grow, his feelings mature, his heart go through more exploits than a heart can, except as may be vaguely intimated from the beat and duration of any of the lines of works" (17). Zukofsky's catalogue is an alternative to this type of chronological ordering. It is a catalogue that begins from one starting point, "Love needs no tongue of reason if love and the eyes are 1," and moves outward in millions of directions, tracking not only the beat and durations of Shakespeare's insistence, but also the sonic bites that intersect what Zukofsky sees as the singular theme of Shakespeare's work. These sonic bites move both backward and forward in time, echoing Plato and reverberating in Wittgenstein. "Shakespeare's theme that *Love sees, No tongue! All eyes!*, which threads the 'compounding' eye-thought of its culture to a later. Together, Wittgenstein and Shakespeare look back with longing almost two thousand years to 'simple' (single) nature, Shakespeare's many words enforce themselves on a reading of Wittgenstein" (85).

Together, Shakespeare and Wittgenstein look back with longing. Their *words* look back with longing. Zukofsky begins Part One with an epigraph, the fifth line of Shakespeare's 59th sonnet: "O, that record could with a backward look" (14). The sixth and seventh lines, quoted later in this section, read: "Even of five hundred courses of the sun,/ Show me your image in some antique book". Books have faces that *look* backward and forward and confront other faces of the past and the future. Zukofsky writes: "Faces are sometimes read like books in this writing—a worn simile in poems of that time. But 'O, that record could with a backward look' (that is, if writing itself could look back as though it suffered the passion of Amor) is not frequent in other writing of that time" (17). If writing could look at other writing as though the former suffered the passion of Amor, as though it overcame its "aberration of the eyes" by making "reason" an "identity of its sight," the latter too would benefit. Writing that looks at writing so that it might, to quote Shakespeare's 59th sonnet again, "see what the old world could say," is writing that looks at writing as if it were a face.

The face, Levinas tells us in *Totality and Infinity*, is "a living presence; it is expression....To approach the Other in conversation is to welcome his expression...it is to *receive* from the Other beyond the capacity of the I, which means exactly: to have the idea of infinity. But this also means: to be taught" (66, 51). Just as we might see the Other without seeing *in* the Other his or her living presence, we can see words without seeing, or hearing, *in* them the expression of *their* living presence. Thus, to approach words from the past as if we are confronting faces, as if we are welcoming expressions, as if we are being taught, is to move away from the tendency to read into the past our own present interests. When Zukofsky complains, as noted earlier, that critics look everywhere for Shakespeare but in "the beat and duration of any of the lines of works," he is lamenting that though they have seen him, they haven't faced him, they haven't heard his expression (17). The sonic elements of language and the expressive elements of the face presence the Other.

Just as Shakespeare and Wittgenstein look back with longing, so does Zukofsky. He longs to face, to sound, the words that he quotes endlessly in *Bottom* because chronological historiography and traditional literary criticism have failed to do so. Rather than breathing upon the catalogue of antiquities in a face-to-face encounter, historians and critics have looked from afar, never having to feel the proximity of the Other's face, let alone his or her breath. *Bottom's* quotes become epitaphs for the undead because Zukofsky takes them at "face value." He writes: "The best warning to the excesses of commentators is perhaps Shakespeare's epitaph: if its words are read at face value the bones are there" (309). We can unearth Shakespeare and know who he was if we are willing to look at his words closely, as if in a face-to-face encounter. For Zukofsky, this has meant painstakingly rewriting not only his words, but the words that he sees forming part of the skeleton that is Shakespeare. If "only speech transforms whatever skeleton remains of the past," then we must re-read and re-speak Shakespeare's epitaph again and again:

If its words are read at face value the bones are there.
If its words are read at face value the bones are there.
If its words are read at face value the bones are there.