

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

Paul Stephens
512 W 112th St. #6G
New York, NY 10025
(212) 866-6588
ps249@columbia.edu

“Harsh Advice to Scholars”: Humanistic, Anti-Historical, and New Critical Elements in

Bottom: On Shakespeare

This paper suggests that, despite its learnedness, *Bottom: On Shakespeare* is a deeply anti-historical and anti-scholarly work. From these premises, I go on to pose two questions which may seem heretical to many current Zukofsky scholars and aficionados: (1) Just how humanism is there in *Bottom*? and (2) Do the anti-historical qualities of *Bottom* mean that it enacts a New Critical evasion of politics, and make *Bottom*, despite its experimental form, largely a study of Shakespearean imagery? The readings suggested by these questions would substantially conflict with comparisons made in the call for papers for this conference—which suggested that *Bottom* had much in common with both Benjamin’s *Arcades Project* and Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory*. *Bottom*, in my reading, displays none of the Marxist agenda of Adorno, Benjamin, or even of the 1930s Zukofsky. Zukofsky’s giant “graph” of quotations, while it may seem postmodern in form, de-contextualizes lyric passages in ways that are as much New Critical as they are postmodern. Written between 1947 and 1960, *Bottom* purports to offer a “graph of culture,” but this “graph of culture” is neither a graph of early Cold War culture or of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English culture.

[I should mention at the outset that this paper extends from another paper which I presented at the Twentieth-Century Literature Conference in Louisville in March (which some of you may have been present for), titled “The Education of Louis Zukofsky, or, Assimilation, ‘A’/vocation, and the Critical Method of a ‘Critic-Poet-Analyst.’” In that talk I explored in detail aspects of Zukofsky’s experiences at Columbia at the same that I explored Zukofsky’s lifelong disdain for professional academics. This disdain, I suggested, is particularly evident in “Poem Beginning ‘The,’” in “A”-13 and “A”-14, and in the Pound/Zukofsky correspondence. Zukofsky’s self-described role of “Critic-Poet-Analyst” allows him to overcome academic specialization. I won’t rehearse more of the argument of my earlier paper here; I merely want to suggest that Zukofsky’s larger attitudes toward academics and toward literary-critical form are important to my reading of *Bottom*.]

Bottom: On Shakespeare may be Zukofsky’s most pedagogical book, yet at the same time it may be his most anti-academic book. Some have criticized *Bottom* because it lacks a coherent thesis; others have tried to explicate its themes as a coherent whole.¹ Both of these impulses are understandable, but they are complicated by the pose of Socratic irony that Zukofsky adopts in *Bottom*. William Carlos Williams had written of Shakespeare: “He belongs to anyone, for this, who can read him—but particularly not to scholarship and scholars” (14). In Zukofsky’s identification with the character Bottom, he assumes a deliberate perspective of not-knowing. At the same time that we, as readers, are being educated we are witnessing Zukofsky conduct his own Shakespearean self-education. *Bottom* is an investigation of the conditions for reading Shakespeare in the context of contemporary poetics and philosophy as much as it is a detailed

¹ For the most comprehensive survey of *Bottom* to date, see Mark Scroggins, *Louis Zukofsky and the Poetry of Knowledge*, pp.45-94. For the argument that *Bottom* “does not cohere” (to use Pound’s words), see David Melnick, “The Ought of Seeing: Zukofsky’s *Bottom*,” *MAPS* 5 (1973): 55-65.

examination of a thesis. Michel Leggott notes Zukofsky's use of a neologism of his own coining, "anhistorical," in his notebooks (49). *Bottom* is just such an "anhistorical" work of montage, easily ranging from Wittgenstein to Aristotle to Spinoza.

The aspect of *Bottom* that I would like to emphasize here is that it is an extremely avocational work; that is to say, it is designed to convince us of the power of individual intellectual engagement without finding itself restricted by traditional scholarly need for historical evidence. *Bottom* was bound to disappoint poets by being too pedantic as a primary work; and it was bound to disappoint academics by not being sufficiently analytical or historical as a secondary critical work. Zukofsky fashions himself as a self-taught Blakean outsider, quoting directly from Blake's *Preface to Milton*:

There is no use in education: I hold it to be wrong. It is a great sin: it is eating of
of
the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. This was the fault of Plato: he knew of nothing but the virtue and vices, and good and evil. There is nothing in all that. Everything is good in God's eyes. (202)

In Zukofsky's attempt to re-privilege vision in *Bottom*, Blake becomes the most radical of allies. It would be mistaken to read Zukofsky too literally here and to take him as condoning anti-intellectualism. But Zukofsky is displaying his suspicion of systematized knowledge, among which he counts academic literary criticism. Zukofsky also quotes Shelley to bolster his anti-critical stance, and specifically tailors the quotation by means of ellipses to suit his own purposes:

There is an education peculiarly fitted for a Poet...No education...can entitle to this appellation a dull and unobservant mind...I have...read the Poets and the Historians and the Metaphysicians...as common sources of those elements

which it is the province of the Poet to embody and combine...Poetry, and the art which professes to regulate and limit its powers, cannot subsist together. (206)

Zukofsky is not deriding education altogether; he is instead offering himself again, as he did in "Mantis: An Interpretation," as a poetic synthesizer of history and philosophy. Zukofsky's suspicion of the academic study of literature is particularly evident when quotes Francis Jammes: "Then as the scholars summoned their thoughts to recall the masterpieces indispensable to the salvation of man, they realized with terror that their brains were void" (234). The demon chasing the specialist is an utter inability to universalize—which is born of the terror of admitting the non-specialist into their field. Zukofsky quotes Emerson approvingly: "Shakespeare will never be made by the study of Shakespeare" (238). As Zukofsky tells us in his very spare *Autobiography*, he did not encounter Shakespeare at first through organized study: "My first exposure to letters at the age of four was thru the Yiddish theaters, most memorably the Thalia on the Bowery. By the age of nine I had seen a good deal of Shakespeare, Ibsen, Strindberg and Tolstoy performed—all in Yiddish" (33).

When he did come to devote over a decade to writing on Shakespeare, in assuming the pose of Bottom Zukofsky assumed the role of an inarticulate non-intellectual. "Bottom *had a most rare vision* and the tongue that *is not able to conceive it...* [italics Zukofsky's] (204). Zukofsky's adoption of the heavily quotational method is a humble admission that the world can speak for itself, that interpretation is implicit in the world of ideas. He quotes Touchstone approvingly: "The fool doth think he is wise, but the wise man knows himself to be a fool" (255). Bottom abandons his own vocation of weaver, if only temporarily, for an avocation that he hopes will offer upward mobility. In his preface, Zukofsky offers Bottom as a model interpreter: "Anyone who explains Shakespeare dreams in character, not with the wisdom of Bottom" (9). Critical distance

is subject to the self-identification of interpreters with characters. When Zukofsky quotes Bottom approvingly that “man is but a patched fool,” he is offering, as Mark Scroggins suggests using Zukofsky’s own words, “a philosophy of suspecting philosophy” (*Bottom* 325). Bottom’s activity of weaving is directly analogous to Zukofsky’s activity of weaving together quotations in *Bottom*, as in the Latin root of text, *textus*, “a woven fabric” or “the fabric made by joining words together” (*Oxford Latin Dictionary*).

Zukofsky is not at all interested in problems of canon formation. Shakespeare’s greatness is taken as a given. *Bottom* re-inscribes the authority of canonical works of literature at the same time as it derides literary critics. Zukofsky is more interested in offering a criticism of criticism than he is in criticizing the literary works whose greatness is assumed by *Bottom*. He begins his critique of Shakespeare scholars by accusing them of lacking humility, and concludes his Preface:

All evaluations of [Shakespeare] have been implicitly insolent. Have they not
pled to sharing part of his greatness in revealing it? The latest criticism could
do better by pleading blindly with Gloucester,

‘I have no way, and therefore want no eyes;
I stumbled when I saw.’ K.L., IV, ii, 20-21

—before starting. (10)

Bottom, it might be said, is not an inquiry into *what* gets read, but rather into *how* it gets read. Whereas “Poem beginning “The”” radically questions the educational elitism required as a precondition of reading canonical literature, *Bottom* assumes that its readers are over-conditioned in faulty and hubristic ways of reading.

Throughout *Bottom*, Zukofsky’s continual undermining of his own interpretive authority constitutes a persistent leitmotif. But to read *Bottom* as exclusively a work

privileging appearance over thought would be to find in it a supremely anti-intellectual stance, as opposed to an anti-academic one. Mark Scroggins resists this in his reading of the book as part of a larger tendency on Zukofsky's part to do away with epistemology:

By associating love with the unerring eye, Zukofsky in practice redefines love itself, removing it from the realm of the passions (which retain their Latin sense of "involuntary motions") and setting it up as a principle of absolute certainty.
(Scroggins 61)

As against *cogito ergo sum*, Zukofsky offers us *amo ergo sum*. Whereas "Mantis" and the earlier portions of "*A*" evinced a solidarity with Popular Front positions, *Bottom* makes no reference at all to contemporary politics. Marx is not mentioned once within *Bottom*'s 600-odd pages. The one place in *Bottom* where Zukofsky seems remotely interested in Cold War politics is the "A-Bomb and H-" section. But even there, Zukofsky refers only in the broadest sense to the culture of the 1950s. He seems to blame the atomic era on a kind Aristotelian "rarefaction" taken to its logical extreme. He quotes Gertrude Stein only once in *Bottom*, and he does so particularly to critique academics:

A creator who creates, who is not an academician, who is not some one who studies in a school where the rules are already known, and of course being known they no longer exist, a creator then who creates is necessarily of his generation. His generation lives in its contemporary way but they only live in it. In art, in literature, in the theatre, in short in everything that does not contribute to their immediate comfort they live in the preceding generation.
(261)

Zukofsky's Shakespeare not only contains his own critique, he predates the culture of academic critique that Zukofsky finds of little use in approaching Shakespeare. In fashioning a pre-critical Shakespeare, Zukofsky finds an unlikely ally in James Russell Lowell:

Shakespeare...found a language...not yet fetlocked by dictionary and grammar mongers, a versification...which had not yet exhausted all its modulations, nor been set in the stocks by critics who deal judgment on refractory feet that will dance to Orphean measures of which their judges are insensible...poetry had not been aliened...by an Upper House of vocables...the living tongue resembled that tree which father Huc saw in Tartary, whose leaves were languaged—and every hidden root of thought, every subtilest fibre of feeling, was mated by new shoots and leafage of expression... (192 [ellipses Zukofsky's])

Shakespeare in this view becomes a writer with total access to language, before language had been codified, professionalized, subject to the division of labor. In Lowell's striking "languaged" leaves (a description, incidentally, that Lorine Niedecker would pick up on) language becomes organically tied to an Arcadian consciousness.² Criticism becomes merely a measure of the fall from grace. Zukofsky quotes no criticism by contemporary Shakespeare scholars, not even that of the one literature professor he seemed to have unqualified respect for during his time at Columbia, Mark Van Doren. So far I can tell, *Bottom* makes only one direct reference to a twentieth-century Shakespeare scholar—to Samuel Tannenbaum, a paleographer (441, 42).

Zukofsky's attempt to remain humble while dismissing professional Shakespeare scholars *en masse* can perhaps best be seen in the "Definition" section of *Bottom* (pp.266-

² Niedecker refers to the phrase in a letter to Zukofsky, 13 December 1963. *Zukofsky and the Correspondence with Niedecker 1931-1970*, ed. Jenny Penberthy (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993). p. 338. Zukofsky also reprinted a portion of this passage from *Bottom* in "A"-17, p. 387.

341). The section consists of a dialogue about Shakespeare between Louis and his son, Paul, in the form of a highly improbable pre-dinner conversation. In the dialogue, Paul is just as knowledgeable about Shakespeare as Louis is, and he humorously taunts Louis in defending the entire project of *Bottom*. Paul advises and then questions his father, by no means taking on the persona of the dialogue's straw man:

You should have stopped before writing 300 pages and, without any comment, let Shakespeare's (your) ever-reliable *definition of love* construct its own graph delineated by a single example from each of his Plays and Poems. That procedure might add up to forty-four short proofs of the canon. Why do you cite endlessly, and presume to cover 'continents,' sidetracking to analogies which I've heard you say you have no taste for, you whom scholars and strays do not attract? (267)

Louis' answer is a somewhat evasive and simplistic: "so the definition of love in Shakespeare may flourish" (267). Paul remains unsatisfied, and as an interlocutor he continues playfully to taunt his father throughout. As in much of Zukofsky's later poetry, the familial spirit takes on a performative aspect. Contrasting himself to "the disciplined scholar" Zukofsky notes that he "must still look up the numbers of the lines..." (283). His engagement with Shakespeare is pointedly an amateur exercise, in the sense that he is explicating his Shakespeare out of love for the activity and out of love for his son. In 1959, the year before he finished *Bottom*, Zukofsky told his student Hugh Seidman at Brooklyn Polytechnic, "I'm no academician" (98). Asked about the "erudition in *Bottom*" in an interview, he claimed: "I don't consider myself a scholar. These are the things I've read, the things I've loved. You asked me about love before. I suppose love means if you do something, that's love; otherwise you don't do anything" (279). At least in part, *Bottom* consciously literalizes and enacts Zukofsky own

perception of his freedom from academic constraints. The Socratic pose allows Zukofsky to be both educator and educated, lover and beloved. The Socratic pose also speaks to a kind of anti-ambition on Zukofsky's part, which in turn speaks to Zukofsky's lifelong cultivation of the antithetical perspective of a poetic and academic outsider. Zukofsky wrote to Lorine Niedecker "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" (qtd. in Ahearn 113). In identifying his early career in terms of his later writings—proleptically creating a parallel identification with Henry Adams—Zukofsky maintained that there was a lifelong consistency to his critical methods.

I am not sure that there was as much consistency to Zukofsky's work as Zukofsky liked to believe. But to return to my questions at the outset of this paper, I want to ask again: How humanistic is *Bottom*? And can we consider *Bottom* to partake of New Critical methods? Were a ninety-nine year-old Zukofsky able to join us today, I think he would not deny that *Bottom*'s theme of "Love sees" is deeply humanist. He would probably be surprised at the degree to which literary scholars have assimilated the anti-humanist ideas of post-structuralism. I think he might also be surprised by the degree to which we assume that experimental critical form must always equate to radical political content. As to the question of how New Critical *Bottom* is, I think Zukofsky would only resist being compared to a bunch of academics. Nonetheless, looked at from the point of view of its political content, there is little reason to believe that *Bottom* is any more radical a work of literary history than, say, Rosamond Tuve's 1947 *Elizabethan and Metaphysical Imagery*.

To criticize *Bottom* on these points is not to deny the originality and value of this still under-appreciated work. One early critic of *Bottom*, David Melnick, suggested that Zukofsky "deals with time by not dealing with it, by denying its reality, by making it

into an unfortunate and self-deceptive quirk of the mind” (qtd. in Scroggins 73). This anti-temporal, anti-historical bias marks *Bottom* as deeply modernist in its *paideuma*-esque transhistorical concerns. I maintain that we would be better off to read *Bottom*’s incomplete “philosophy of suspecting philosophy” as bearing residual humanist (or even pragmatist) elements rather than to read *Bottom* as a harbinger of postmodern uncertainty. To do so would be to read *Bottom* as posing important problems concerning aesthetic value, literary enjoyment, and what might be called literary epistemology. *Bottom* is uniquely un-New Critical in its emphasis on epistemology, and in its deep reluctance to offer interpretation. *Bottom* does not provide a method for mastering texts; it provides a method for being mastered by texts. This may be “harsh advice to scholars” (443) of all eras, but this might also be a way of reading *Bottom* more skeptically and more historically—and perhaps, in the end, no less lovingly.

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