

Re-Reading Louis Zukofsky's *Bottom: On Shakespeare*
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“Words spin”: Spinoza in the Poetics of Zukofsky's *Bottom*

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1) Zukofsky's interest in Spinoza has long been noted and extends throughout most of his career: Spinoza is mentioned in passing in “Poem beginning ‘The,’” quoted as part of the original statement of Objectivist poetics in “A”-6, supplies the primary content for the second half of “A”-9, is one of the major keys in “A”-12, where Zukofsky remarks: “My Spinoza I take so often / to the country, / Falling apart...” (246). In *Bottom*, Spinoza alone is extensively called upon in Part I to support Zukofsky's initial statement of his theme on the “different degrees of ‘Love's mind’” (*Bottom* 19) throughout Shakespeare's work. This presence extends into Part II joined by Aristotle and Wittgenstein, who it could argued are read by Zukofsky as mediated through Spinoza.

2) Despite the impossibility of overlooking Spinoza's significance, there has been little serious discussion of his presence in Zukofsky's work, and passing references usually betray a befuddlement as to what Spinoza is about or why Zukofsky was so engaged by the thinker. This is not altogether surprising in that Spinoza has the reputation as a bit of a mind-bender, whose method can be taxing and who is associated with a spectrum of positions—monism, determinism, rationalism and the like—that are hardly in the highest esteem among American literary intellectuals these days. Nevertheless, the fact that Zukofsky was much attracted to such thinkers—and, for example, preferred Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* to the *Philosophical Investigations*—cannot be indefinitely avoided. Since his lifetime Spinoza been associated with all manner of radical thinking, which more recently has manifested itself in the Marxism of Althusser and his circle on the one hand and the thinking of Deleuze on the other, which might lead one to believe that this connection is worth exploring.

3) “An objective—nature as creator—desire / for what is objectively perfect / Inextricably the direction of historic and / contemporary particulars” (“A”-6, 24).

For Spinoza, any entity endeavors to persist in its being, that is, to realize its nature or essence, which is precisely the same as its perfection or reality. Any entity's essence, nature or perfection is not some abstract ideal or static state but is quite simply an entity's self-realization, its desire to be, which always entails increased power and activity: “The more perfection anything has, the more active and the less passive it is; . . . the more active it is, the more perfect it becomes” (qtd. *Bottom* 26).¹ Spinoza's famous terms *natura naturans* (nature as creator) and *natura naturata* (nature as created) are better understood as active and passive nature respectively, the former implicating the totality of God-Nature whereas the latter indicates the relatively finite entities immanent in God-Nature. Our individual existence and self-realization is relative to our understanding and attunement of ourselves to God, the totality, nature as creator. It is

not merely humans or even animate entities that endeavor for self-realization but all entities (Spinoza's pantheism); therefore, not least the poem desires perfection, its self-realization as inextricably realized within the totality.

4) "All of Shakespeare's writing embodies a definition, a continuing variant of it over so many years. It is a definition of love that the learning of the later (specifically English) Renaissance had forgotten: the definition of love as the tragic hero. He is Amor, identified with the passion of the lover falling short of perfection—discernment, fitness, proportion—at those times when his imagination insufficient to itself is an aberration of the eyes; but when reason and love are an identity of sight its clear and distinct knowledge can approach the sufficient realizations of the intellect" (*Bottom* 15).

Zukofsky's initial statement in *Bottom* of his argument is both a reformulation of his Objectivist poetics and a Spinozian paradigm for reading through Shakespeare. The *Works* are read as manifesting manifold variations on an increase or decrease of activity and being, which Zukofsky formulates as a relative harmonization or identity of love and eyes, mind and reason, that is, "the sufficient realization of the intellect." Immediately following the above definition Zukofsky offers the first cluster of Spinoza quotations, which give an alternative formulation as well as helping to define certain terms that Zukofsky has taken over from Spinoza. Imagination is literally knowledge based on images, on the affects of our body's contact with other bodies, and as such is necessarily always inadequate because it only give us knowledge of the point of contact so to speak, rather than of the other bodies as a whole or in turn of our own body. Zukofsky quotes Spinoza's insistence that the imagination is not in itself false or in error but simply incomplete or inadequate—error in Spinoza is never positive but always a matter of limits and incomplete understanding (qtd. *Bottom* 19-20, 76). Passions are passive emotions that are necessarily inadequate because based on imagination and therefore decrease one's activity or being, but if brought in line with reason are transformed into active emotions that increase power and being. Therefore, "Desire which arises from reason can have no excess" (qtd. *Bottom* 16) because such desire or emotion is necessarily in tune with one's nature and increases one's activity and being. The feeling of increased activity or being is the Spinozian definition of pleasure (or joy) and pain is simply a decreasing movement. (cf. *A Test of Poetry*: "The test of poetry is the range of pleasure it affords as sight, sound, and intellection. This is its purpose as art"). In Zukofsky's definition above, he emphasizes the tragic and the inevitability of falling short of full realization of being, although elsewhere Zukofsky points out in explicitly Spinozian terms that Shakespeare's works explore the full range human experience from relative fulfillment (comedy) to its failures (tragedy) and the manifold possibilities (the histories and tragicomedies in between (*Bottom* 20-21, 24).

Zukofsky's later formulations of his definition in Part Two of *Bottom* emphasize the ratio or proportion among his key terms: love : reason :: eyes : mind, where ideally there should be an identity of love and eyes, reason and mind—in which case love is to reason as eyes are to mind (*Bottom* 266). Spinoza's monism insists that mind and body are simply different modes of perceptions of a single substance. Although distinct modes, any event in extension (body) simultaneously happens in the mind and vice versa. Indeed, Spinoza claims "the object of the idea constituting the human mind is the body" (qtd. *Bottom* 94). In *Bottom* "eyes" are Zukofsky's synecdochic shorthand for the body. Putting it somewhat crudely, when someone is maximized then the eyes/body love and the mind reasons, which also should be understood as analogous in their respective modes. One reason Zukofsky privileges the language of "eyes," "sight,"

“light,” etc. is that it so readily operates across both modes of extension (body) and mind/thought. The tragic tendency Zukofsky reads throughout Shakespeare’s works and by extension into modern cultural history is the misprision resulting in the disharmony between body and mind—which in and of itself is a typically modernist critique, although Zukofsky’s response is less typical.

5) “The basis for written characters, for words, must be the physiological fact of love, arising from sight, accruing to it and the other senses, and entering the intellect (which, not Time’s fool, does not make the eye untrue), for the art of the poet must be to inform and delight with Love’s strength (and with Love’s failings only because they are necessary.)” (*Bottom* 17)

Zukofsky’s privileging of the eyes throughout *Bottom* is also due to the fact that reading is the paradigmatic act of seeing he has in mind, and he desires to return us to a bodily awareness of reading. The poem as characters is first eyed then sounded (at least if a phonetic script), lovingly eyed with the intent of increasing love’s strength as the poet/reader endeavors to maximize her/himself. The loving eye identifies with the text which then looks back as the body and the mind act as one. To the annoyance of some, Zukofsky is relatively uninterested in the character psychology and dramatic situations of Shakespeare’s plays. Primarily the variations on the balance and proportion of love’s mind are manifest directly in the detail of Shakespeare’s language regardless of who speaks in what context. Instead we have an exercise in reading the text as a physical body, in which the obsessive noting of every appearance of “eyes,” “sight,” “light,” etc. is the mark and reminder of what Shakespeare-Zukofsky-reader are physically doing. Love draws us to the text, that is, love in Spinozian terms is identical with our essence or nature that orients us toward the world, an active body among other bodies rather than mere inert passivity. Our body engages with the body of the text resulting in affects that alters both. So when Zukofsky recasts Horace’s classical definition of poetry as “to inform and delight with Love’s strength,” he means that the poem literally enters and re-forms the body of the reader, that is, re-proportions to some extent the body-mind of the reader, which simultaneously de-lights the reader who experiences an increase in activity or being as pleasure, which implies an increase of love’s strength as well.

6) “Under the aspect of eternity, where all things exist equally with the same force as when they began to exist, nothing of the mutual need of course be *said*; thought is only conflation of extension, and extension of thought, *until* the bass-string of humility is suddenly aware of the presumption of having said something about the holiness of the treble. And then without reference to an all’s equal, external existence art exists in agitation and activity where no human sense is cut off from another and netted in whatever *Ethics* such an organism as Spinoza can produce, or be increased or diminished by, ‘in so far as it is understood by his nature’” (*Bottom* 423-424).

A Spinozian poetics conceives of the poem as a complex body that engages with the complex body of the poet-reader. As a distinct body with a distinct objecthood, the poem has its own essence-nature-being that endeavors to maximize itself, to realize a state of objectification in Zukofsky’s earlier formulation. The poem’s nature, as a finite body, is necessarily bound up with the body of language and all the manifold affects that entails. As a complex body the poem affects the poet-reader to a greater or lesser degree, for better or worse—properly speaking the power and activity of both poem and reader should be increased moving toward perfection of love’s reason. In Deleuze’s paraphrase of Spinoza, this can be understood as a matter of the composition or

decomposition of bodies when they come into contact: to the degree that the bodies are compatible they enter into composition with each other, thus quite literally increasing themselves; whereas incompatibility causes greater or lesser decomposition, which can reach the point where a body loses its identity. A complex body's identity or being is determined by a certain ratio between its parts (bodies) which defines its essence-nature; complex bodies can and do constantly change without necessarily losing this essential ratio that defines their nature—however, once this ratio becomes unstuck and that complex body decomposes, the implication is that there is a recomposition of its parts with other bodies. This description is in the mode of extension (bodies), which is paralleled in the mode of thought. Such a poetics recognizes the substantial being of the poem as having its own distinct complex body that can be objectively analyzed as such, yet simultaneously recognizing its complex dependence on the poet, reader, language, the world—indeed, on the totality within which all of these are immanently interdependent and interconnected. Ideally we would rise with or through the poem to that state indicated in Zukofsky's quotation above, in which he understands Spinoza's famous conception “under the aspect of eternity” (*sub species aeternitatis*) where all entities are absolutely distinct and absolutely interdependent. “Extended existence art,” e.g. the poem, then affects the individual poet-reader “in so far as it is understood by his nature” (qtd. *Bottom* 421).

There is an ethical insistence throughout *Bottom* to accept our insertion in the body of the world and that our nature orients us toward the world, which is what Zukofsky means by love. “The eyes of the mind by which it sees things and observes them are proofs” (qtd. *Bottom* 26, 94) because we belong here, because love as the desire to maximize our being is immanent in and with the world whose orders must be recognized as our own. Such recognition is radically democratic, an orientation that can weight each entity or even the most seemingly insignificant particles of language according to their own value and nature, which ultimately requires a recognition of their place in the totality. A poetry based on such an orientation moving toward realization in “A”-22 & -23 and beyond insists on recognition in detail, on its own objecthood that resists predatory intentions in order to realize a relationship of activating proportion.

¹ All quotations from Spinoza are taken from *Bottom*. Zukofsky used the translation by Andrew Boyle of *Ethics* [including the *Treatise on the Correction of the Understanding*] (New York: E.P. Dutton, Everyman Library, 1910) with an introduction by George Santayana. Boyle's translation is not now considered very reliable, although it strikes me as in many respects more elegant than the currently preferred versions.