

## THE 'OUGHT' OF SEEING: ZUKOFSKY'S BOTTOM

Like Ben Johnson in his conversations with Drummond of Hawthornden, Zukofsky in the Wisconsin interview allows himself a few genial ironies, but also displays a definite, almost pedagogical, interest in clarifying his artistic and personal commitments. He makes a point of demonstrating the agreement between his theory and practice in poetry. The occasional irony is more a time-saving device than a contemptuous denial of his questioner. Early on, he volunteers "The Old Poet Moves to a New Apartment 14 Times" as a summary of the thoughts he had been getting at. At the line, "All the questions are answered with their own words," cribbed from Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, he interrupts himself and asks, like a mischievous nine-year-old, "What was your question?" Dembo, unruffled, makes him continue. Later, though, Zukofsky sees an opening, or rather, he protects himself from further probing with a quip:

. . . For anybody who is interested in the theory of knowledge, which is done away with in *Bottom* . . .

Q. What do you mean, you got rid of epistemology in *Bottom*? The work seems to me to be all epistemology.

A. "The questions are their own answers." You want to say "yes," say "yes"; you want to say "no," say "no." It's a useless argument.

Zukofsky's response, though it may be a "defense," is nonetheless a philosophically grounded one. As Spinozistic resignation it would imply that one cannot change anything by such an argument. All alternatives are imaginary. Taken as irony or concealed dialectic, it would mean that Dembo's idea that Zukofsky's book is a work of epistemology is mistaken. The implicit answer would be that the form he has chosen permits him, in the very act of putting *all* epistemology *into* his book, to contain, negate, and transcend it. Thus Zukofsky has done away with the *theory of knowledge*, and returned us to the eyes themselves.

In these pages, I do not take a stand on what the form performs in *Bottom*,

though that needs to be done, and will be. Rather, I take up the explicit doctrine set forth in argument and quotation in the book, and try to show some of its features, including the attitude toward Shakespeare it implies. My accent on Aristotle, Spinoza, and Wittgenstein is Zukofsky's; so is my reluctance to distinguish poetry from life, or to speak of Zukofsky's indebtedness to specifically poetic theory, e.g., Pound's. I complain a great deal. I hope this complaint will be understood to have its historical reasons, and not be seen to qualify my admiration for all the diverse resources that make Zukofsky a source of our whole endeavor in poetry.

### 1. *Bottom: on Shakespeare As Theory*

In giving us his "definition of love" in a codified version, "love : reason :: eyes : mind," Zukofsky alludes to an Aristotelian device—revived most recently and with fervor by the Logical Positivists (and their Niebelungs the computer scientists)—of allowing a relation in the world to be expressed as a formula, and of inferring that logical transformations of the formula have the same truth-value as the original expression. One can find such an equation—without the additional inferences—in a discussion of metaphor in the *Poetics* (1457b.7-33). Throughout Aristotle's writings, geometric formulae are used to express analytic, scientific, and linguistic relations, and, less often, ethical and psychological ones. Zukofsky must have taken particular note of a passage in a book he quotes extensively, *De Anima* (431a.20-431b.1), that formalizes what we would now speak of as the difference between sensation and perception. Aristotle infers the unity of the perceptual faculty from the unity of individual objects themselves by using the purely formal equivalence between the proportions " $C/A=D/B$ " and " $C/D=B/A$ ." If A is the quality "sweet" and B the quality "white," and if they both inhere in the same object, then C and D, the senses of taste and sight, must, by the equation, also inhere as attributes in the same substance, the "sensible soul," or faculty of perception. The passage neatly illustrates the way in which Greek geometry, with the seductive clarity of its notion of self-evident truths (i.e., truths that show themselves—without further justification—equally to all), entered philosophy with such force that its style of expression was imported with almost equal status, and with an almost equal bias to the future course, the look, of Western thought. Thus, Zukofsky: "Love needs no tongue of reason if love and the eyes are *I*—an identity" (p. 39); "love

and the eyes are one if reason and the mind are one . . . reason has been implicitly made to equal looking" (p. 77); "*means equal extremes*: when reason judges with eyes, love and mind are one . . . reason and eyes are one . . . Extremes of the characters always equal their dramatic means" (p. 266); "it is best actually to look with the eyes—otherwise reason is not happy love" (p. 267).

This part of *De Anima* is central to the understanding of Zukofsky's theme, and not just of his interest in the proportion as a mode of expressing it. He radically rejects Aristotle's notion of the synthetic unity of perception, and, with it, the difference between perception and (visual) sensation. "The mind of the eyes" (p. 325) is to be found in the eyes themselves. Aristotle's pseudo-logical model of perception formed the basis for most traditional psychology. In it, only pure sensations could not deceive us. One had to see white as white. But our actual perception of objects was a unity composed of (1) pure sensations, (2) the perceptions of motion, figure, magnitude, etc., that are common to all the senses and monitor and discriminate among the data of each, and (3) the concomitant attributes, e.g., the names of persons, that we might attach to the objects we perceive through the connections we could make between past and present images. Hence, perception always involved something analogous to a judgment or synthesis. This meant that it was liable to error. Appetite was another complicating factor in perception, adding a new judgment, "pleasant" (or "painful"), to each of the others. In the analogous structure, it was required by Aristotle's "organic" theory of nature that reason should be a proper movement, or desire, of the intellect. The theory of actuality as activity (*energeia*) suggested that a natural function or exercise of the sensory part of the soul was desire, and that a natural exercise of the mind was reason. We can see Zukofsky's formula taking shape from these quite different aspects of the Aristotelian doctrine. But Zukofsky rejects the pseudo-logical model of perception itself. He takes up the notion of the infallibility of pure *sensation*, and asserts that there can be no error in the direct *visual perception* of objects. He derives, and then gives categorical status to, a distinction between seeing and hearing that he draws from isolated descriptions in Aristotle (*De Anima* 435b.20-25; *Metaphysics* 980b.22-27; *Ethics* 1171b.30). He now turns on its head the praise of hearing found in *De Anima* III.13. "The mind's peace" (p. 13) is both peace and quiet. He postulates the spoken and heard word, "communication" (435b.25), to be the real source of harm in human life. To all of its modes, as, for example, to grammar, rhetoric, logic, and dialectic, he gives, following Aristotle, the single name "reason." He takes Aristotle's "real" good (the object toward which reason directs the mind) to be a detached phantom—compared to the "apparent" good—unless Love grounds it in the eye's commands.

Zukofsky is intellectually committed to a belief that all of life's dangers take the

form of purely mental vanities. In *Bottom* he returns often and with approval to Aristotle's quarrel with Plato over the nature of the mind's objects—a quarrel that went far toward formulating the maxim, “no ideas but in things.” He sees in Aristotle's vacillation between ideas and things, the mind and the eye, what he calls “an old story of culture” (p. 41). When we are torn away from the concrete seen particular by a generalizing, universalizing mind, what we feel is Nostalgia. Zukofsky believes that the connections he discovers in this regard among writers of different times, as between Aristotle and Shakespeare, Spinoza, and Wittgenstein, reveal fundamental aspects of their character, and, by inference, of all human nature.

Plato, of course, had his version of nostalgia, his Love that moved men to recall and rejoin pure Being. Zukofsky, reversing the roles that Plato gave to sensing and knowing, believes that in love a man's eyes have never deceived him. Properly guided, love is his consciousness of objects in the world. But, for Zukofsky, Being is no less eternal than it is for Plato. Love is the mind's desire and the eyes' achievement. Strife is the invention of the mind. Peace is the real state of objects. The concrete is without motion.

To find the adequation he wants between two large themes in his work, love and the object, he preserves the Aristotelian requirement that *qua* beloved, an object is unmoved, “uncluttered.” This is equivalent to the Spinozistic tenet that “variation” is a delusion to be contained and transcended by the intellectual love of perfect, eternal nature, i.e., of God. Zukofsky's choice of Spinoza and the early Wittgenstein as the coordinates of his argument reveals more than a critical interest in their “abstracted look.” He shares with them, as with Shakespeare, fears of chance and change, i.e., of Time itself. Like them, but unlike Shakespeare, he 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.

It is worthwhile quoting two passages from Spinoza that Zukofsky reproduces in his text (p. 16):

Desire which arises from reason can have no excess.

*Ethics* II.40, schol. 2

. . . unhealthy states of mind and misfortunes owe their origin for the most part to excessive love for a thing that is liable to many

variations and of which we may never seize the mastery. For no one is anxious or cares about anything that he does not love, nor do injuries, suspicions, enmities arise from anything else than love towards a thing of which no one is truly master. From this we can easily conceive what a clear and distinct knowledge . . . can do with the emotions, namely, that if it does not remove them entirely as they are passions . . . at least brings it about that they constitute the least possible part of the mind . . . . Moreover, it gives rise to love towards a thing immutable and eternal . . . and of which we are in truth masters . . . and which cannot be polluted . . . but . . . occup[ies] the greatest part of the mind . . . and deeply affect[s] it.

*Ethics* V.20, schol.

Zukofsky writes: (p. 24):

There is but one cure for this lack of mastery: 'a clear and distinct knowledge' that would have the 'emotions,' inasmuch as they are *passions*, 'constitute the least possible part of the mind' . . . [in] Shakespeare . . . when the passions tend to constitute the least possible part of the mind of the characters, the result is 'comedy'; when the passions are irresoluble for them, the result is 'tragedy' . . . .

Desire, as the principle of motion in the soul, is the sense (the direction, meaning, understanding, intention, will, awareness, projection) of the future. Spinoza and Zukofsky both rectify desire and defeat uncertainty, Spinoza by denying reality to what is contradictory when seen *through* time, Zukofsky by confining the reach of desire within what is already present and definite. In Zukofsky's passage, the phrase "clear and distinct" does not describe the purity of the ideas that for the rationalist are their own guarantee of truth. Self-validating transparency belongs to the eyes. But, though there

is no quarrel in nature, Zukofsky's "desired order of sight" (p. 19) already splits order from Chaos. In the ethic implied by "the result is 'comedy,'" love and the visible are correlatives. Spontaneity cannot be loved as such; hence, we do not see it—it is Nothing. Only love's *erring mind* grasps after phantoms, gives a face to change, and directs us away from the enduring object to "excessive love for a thing that is liable to many variations, and of which we may never seize the mastery." It is here that Zukofsky's affinity with the rationalist tradition runs deeper than his insistence on the neutrality of the eyes' evidence would suggest. The eyes see clearly; but they fix upon what is properly capable of being fixed upon and "mastered," i.e., on what is stationary or regular in its motion. It is still a species of *regulated information* that gives witness to fact, cures passion, and reveals a benevolent order. Permanence is still a cause (*ratio*). Evil, since it is that-which-is-without-cause, i.e., "variation," is ultimately an illusion, because all that is real is grounded—for Zukofsky in substance as much as for Spinoza in Substance.

Thus, the "eyes" praised in *Bottom* are no more neutral than the "mind" Zukofsky berates. Predictability is the rope stretched round the visible by the mastering, masterful eye of love, just like the tautologies of Wittgenstein's "I" that sort out sense from non-sense. For what should spontaneity *look* like?

## 2. *Bottom: on Shakespeare* on Shakespeare

A gentler tone (than usual) emerges in *Bottom* in some phrases that inweave familiar Zukofskyan tags with delicate responses to Shakespeare. Of Thisby he writes, "These words edge pleasure, innocence and terror. They canter towards a thoughtful, sensuous, and pre-archaic wall all at once." But Shakespeare was an extravagant writer. The love of such extravagance is the unspoken motive of all who admire him unconditionally. Zukofsky, defending himself against Shakespeare's waves of words, brings this sharply into view. Like Pound he finds the best poetry in the songs; and like Wyndham Lewis he pares his Shakespeare down to a philosophical core.

The first such paring involves a critique of the kinds of clarity to be found in poetry. In one judgment of this type, Zukofsky dispraises Shakespeare's adaptation, in *The Tempest*, of a speech from Ovid.

A brainier Shakespeare, only 46 years later (than Golding's Ovid) like Biron, failing, tired horse, his rider—shadowing forth 'magical' renunciation of Prospero—can only decorate a subject:

'Ye elves . . .  
And ye that on the sands with printless foot  
Do chase the ebbing Neptune, and do fly him  
When he comes back'

V.1.33

The verses creep. The chant wears thin as the whim.  
*Printless* is non-sense: fable worn thin by brain.

"The chant wears thin as the whim," and "fable worn thin by brain," refer to Zukofsky's theory of language, an expansion of Poundian categories. Sight, sound, and intellection are the solid, liquid, and gaseous states of language. Sight is best, and by the earliest times men had developed a language of definite reference (the logician's ideal). The liquidity of music, song, and fable gave way in our own time to pure air—discourse and thought. So, Medea's literal flight in Ovid has been abstracted, offstaged, in the flight of the spirits. Also, Zukofsky believes that the magic or supernatural events in Shakespeare "are mere projections of his characters' mental states." Hence, the quotes around "magical": the spirits of *The Tempest* are not "meant" to be seen as clearly as the streams that Medea made to run "cleane back ward to their spring." But Zukofsky's most striking criterion is the chastity of the language itself: "*Printless* is non-sense." He means that the word "foot" contains in its definition the predicate, "makes print on sand." Hence, if "printless," then not "foot." One cannot say "with printless foot," therefore one must not. Let us recall that Wittgenstein at one time thought he could give the framework for a purely positive knowledge, a knowledge independent of dialectical reason. He wanted to show that all statements using negation were propositional functions, hence reducible to statements without negatives. To this end he welcomed Sheffer's stroke—a cumbersome notational device—into the *Tractatus*. Zukofsky's attention is caught like a loose thread in a garment upon Shakespeare's single new word. He sees it as a function of simpler elements, and finds a contradiction. The criterion is specific, for he does not take exception to the "contradiction" involved in the "positive" words of Golding's Ovid.

With this "set" toward his text Zukofsky passes by or condemns outright much of what Shakespeare wrote, including the abundant store of concrete visual imagery. He reserves for praise or special status only the references he finds *to sight* and the eyes, etc., along with "love," "reason," "mind," "thought," etc., and a few other terms from his philosophers. Zukofsky's Shakespeare is explicitly two-layered, for, as he says, the definition defines Shakespeare, too. The real or essential Shakespeare thinks with Zukofsky that "seeing should be the object of speech" (p. 88). But the message is hidden under another Shakespeare, made up of the distractions of "plots," "psychologizing," "mere rhetoric," "ornament," and "a too profuse richness of perception." Zukofsky's distaste for the surface meaning will seem less arbitrary if we note (1) that his stated preference is for a Shakespeare on the page, not the stage, and (2) that he says he reads all the plays and poems as one work—a long poem of a hundred thousand lines bound by a single thetic thread. It is not surprising that he feels that "too often there are too many words on hand."

After the rhetorical shell is removed, the kernel is shown to be the theme itself—"Love sees." Two postulates and two corollaries are the needed ground for Zukofsky's construction of the theme from Shakespeare's lines. 1. Every essential action, feeling, thought, and word found in Shakespeare can be explained. The dyad of sight and insight—if it stems from an objective realism implying everywhere the existence of the world—is an adequate framework for such an explanation. In particular, the framework is adequate for Shakespeare's "definition of love" as a function of "constant" and "variable" terms ("eye" and "mind") in such an epistemology. 2. Shakespeare felt that reality and value attach properly to one half of the dyad, "eyes rather than understanding" (p. 142), though he could not rid himself of an historically inevitable reliance on intellection. For the most part he was forced to mourn the loss in later times of man's primitive trust in the eyes. 3. Shakespeare attached a corollary ethical imperative to his definition of love. Love has the power to limit the fulfillment of the eyes' proper ends, which are no less than the perfect apprehension of the visible world: "sight . . . manifest science" (p. 163). Therefore, love should not let the mind persuade it to any loyalty other than to the eyes. The mind's independent commands would, by their very nature, be errant, variable, and ruinous to the eyes' just demands: "sight is *right*" (p. 382). 4. A second corollary is that Shakespeare's "longing," "backward look" directs that the job of the reader should be to discover the true meaning—"physical sight," or "rooted in physical sight"—in a special set of words occurring in the plays and poems. These words offer "infinite variation on a thought of the excellence of eyes" (p. 101). They include the parts of the definition ("love," "reason," "eyes," "mind"), as well as some other terms "made to equal looking" (p. 77).

Zukofsky now wants to retain, not discard, a large group of words. For this purpose



he ignores meanings that do not accord with his definition. The intent of his entire project comes into question here. If the reader *refuses* to go along with Zukofsky's procedure, is he not in the same position as one who might quarrel with Shakespeare for not having written his *Troilus* in Chaucer's stanzas? If he does accede to Zukofsky's demands, then what becomes of the "on" in *Bottom: on Shakespeare*? That is, what status does Zukofsky's book have as a reading of Shakespeare's plays and poems? Rather than forcing the issue, the book shimmers between these two aspects or species. The reader is angered and pleased by turns, and grows to expect this, as if he had played a favorite record a dozen times at double speed, to the point where he needed the faster version's urgent feel again from time to time.

For example, Zukofsky quotes the song, "Tell me where is fancy bred," as a prelude to a faultless and beautifully achieved summary of his theory of love's and thought's dependence upon sight. The dramatic context of the song precisely reverses the meaning he takes its words to have. In the play the lines are sung just as the audience is most eager that Bassanio prove worthy of Portia by choosing the casket least likely to attract his eye, the casket of lead, which, conveniently enough, the audience also knows to be the one that will win her. While we wait in hope, the song describes Fancy, engendered in the eyes, fed on gazes, and dying where it was born. Bassanio hazards all, wins Portia, and, in the verses that announce his reward to him, is addressed, "You that choose not by the view." Zukofsky takes the song alone. He generalizes "fancy" to "purpose," and speaks approvingly of a Shakespeare who demands that all "purpose" (= "love" in the definition) be founded in "sense" (= the gazes that fed Fancy). That is, he assumes we will agree that the song is a *praise* of the eyes' tutelage in matters of love. Now the song is clearly not just a *dispraise* of the eyes. It is a tender farewell to Fancy, nostalgic perhaps, or humorous; it is a delicate comment on the dramatic moment, in which Love depends on going beyond the whole depressing baggage of sight and insight; and it is a concentrated and lovely exercise in technique that Zukofsky of all living poets has come closest to emulating. What is more, the reader of *Bottom* understands precisely that Zukofsky knows all of this, and, knowing it, still prefers to read the song as if from an anthology or a Shakespeare garland. It is at this point that the reader readjusts his sights altogether, and accepts for the purpose a *dictum* that the context of the song is now (or *here*) not the play but *Bottom* itself. What was his plough is his field, and will be his plough, changing back, and again, on each page.

The reader will go along with this method—after some resistance—and find himself rejecting what had seemed the more available meanings in favor of what he had thought to be inessential ones. He will go further, and seek out a Zukofskyan co-ordination for quotes that Zukofsky himself has not already supplied with links. From Homeric and

Shakespearean uses of the word "surgeons" (p. 380), the reader will elaborate his own comparison. If we had taken Lear's bitter punning—"Let me have surgeons; I am cut to th' brains"—as our own index to the depths that Shakespeare reveals, we are paid for it now. From its own country of infinite sadness and grief, Lear's brutally *seen* image proposes to remove the ground utterly and forever from physical looking. But after nearly four hundred pages of *Bottom*, we have learned to appreciate Zukofsky's "positive aspect" (p. 25). We may be jolted to find ourselves wanting his perspective to re-sort our own and draw us back from a context that allows inward suffering such sway. It will always be true that "a surgeon's worth many another man," whatever his insufficiency in Lear's case. A line from Homer becomes a proper mirror for Shakespeare's. Yet Shakespeare's extravagance will have made some readers blush, and wonder at it. If the reader cannot let hold of the feeling that Lear's defiant outcry rushes in on him with a truth that is not just mental blast or a pander to self-pity, then he must leave Zukofsky's whole setting behind. He has long since opted for a world that *Bottom* seeks to expose as shallow and valueless.

But, Zukofsky has told us, "Don't suggest the plots. I'm listening to the words" (p. 274). After carefully putting away rhetoric, plot, local context, and the suggestive reach of single lines, there remain the special words of the definition. Here the reader's two-laned progress re-opens before him. "Reason," "love," "mind," etc., come under Zukofsky's rule for interpretation. The eyes themselves require it: Zukofsky seeks a reference to the generalized capacity of sight in every use Shakespeare made of the eyes as an image. A multitude of images of the beauty of the eyes is explained *via* Plato as the power of sight itself, for we only admire those eyes which are "useful for the purpose of seeing. De we not?" That is, another's eyes are beautiful insofar as they imitate the one set that counts, the objectifying "I" of pure sight, without personality. Similarly, tears become inexcusable wanderings from the eyes' true function, not a witness to a man's obligations to others' griefs. Heaven's looks, whether gracious or angry, are metaphors for our look upon the physical world, not a shaping gaze that might tell us *our* limits. The reader discovers what he has suspected all along, that Zukofsky's world has no room for people in it: he will not deal with more than one pair of eyes at a time. At this point, the reader will rebel. He requires no context outside Zukofsky's to see the "definition" fall shy of the texts that are quoted as witnesses to it. In the quotes there is a wealth of concrete detail. Refreshingly, Shakespeare involves more than one person in nearly every image. "Love, first learned in a lady's eyes," already entails a situation that Zukofsky's philosophical framework is insufficient to describe. Whether fierce, false, melting, or precious, the eyes in these images make judgments, express feelings, reveal attitudes, biases, characteristics. They are called up most typically when concrete human relations are at issue. They are available to

Shakespeare as a ready means—to acknowledge, ignore, entreat, threaten, welcome, submit. They are proofs, not cures, of passion.

Zukofsky is perfectly aware that, as he puts it, Shakespeare will not yield us a Divine Comedy. But all the excitement for him is in the possibility of such an attainment. A Divine Lyric such as Sonnet 116 or (in Zukofsky's interpretation) "The Phoenix and the Turtle" sits in judgment over all of Shakespeare's plays—and finds them wanting. But is not Zukofsky's fixing gaze the one that needs judging? Rilke, thinking of that gaze, said that the lover may be thought unhappy, but is actually safe—it is the beloved who is in mortal danger. Sartre has laid bare the covert sadism in the humble looks of love. In Shakespeare, the great have power to actualize this gaze. In actions and characters, Shakespeare sets forth just those necessary consequences of Zukofsky's ideal which shows its insufficiency. The objectifying look is situated in a context that matters; and the dry light turns to fire. When put into play, the tyrant eye of love grasps at the death or immobilization of the beloved. If Cordelia threatens to match Lear look for look, he strips her of the means. If Desdemona will not lie still, Othello stills her. Disguises allow the desperate to escape, or to return as spies (phantom kings). But, inevitably, in comedy as in tragedy every eye is met by another and must voluntarily *give up* some part of its mastery or be denied it altogether. The world cannot be seized, cannot be rectified, by the invisible, characterless "I." Edgar discovers its insufficiency when he sees his father poorly led. Sight discloses a world that is not right, and not the less remediless for being seen. Nor is the world mastered by the eyes' surrogate, the king. With Tolstoyan precision, Shakespeare makes even his Henry V ignorant of the endless "variation" in the energies of the ranks that mix to make "his" victory at Agincourt. Cleopatra forever measures Caesar's victorious looks. Oberon re-weaves the vectors of logical space.

David Melnick

---

The portraits of Louis and Celia Zukofsky were made in their home in New York in 1968 by Ralph Eugene Meatyard (1925-1972), whose work is in most museums and major collections. He met the Zukofskies in 1964, in Lexington, Ky., and was an avid student of their work. Mr. Meatyard did the photographs for his and Wendell Berry's *The Unforeseen Wilderness* (University of Kentucky Press, 1971), a poetic and ecological study of the Red River Gorge. A fine selection of his work can be seen in Jonathan Greene's *Ralph Eugene Meatyard* (Gnomon Press, 1970). His *Lucy Belle Crater*, a series of photographs, is being published by Jargon Press, and a forthcoming issue of *Aperture* will be devoted to his work, which over the past decade has been shown at various exhibits, including MIT, Eastman House, the Speed Museum, and the National Gallery of Canada.

Photographs © Ralph Eugene Meatyard